MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

# FANTASY

MAGAZINE
*Issue 7*
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by
Mary A.
Turzillo

"THE HALL OF THE WINTER FOLK"
by STEPHEN C. FISHER

An Opportunity
*from*
**Andre Norton**
*page 10*

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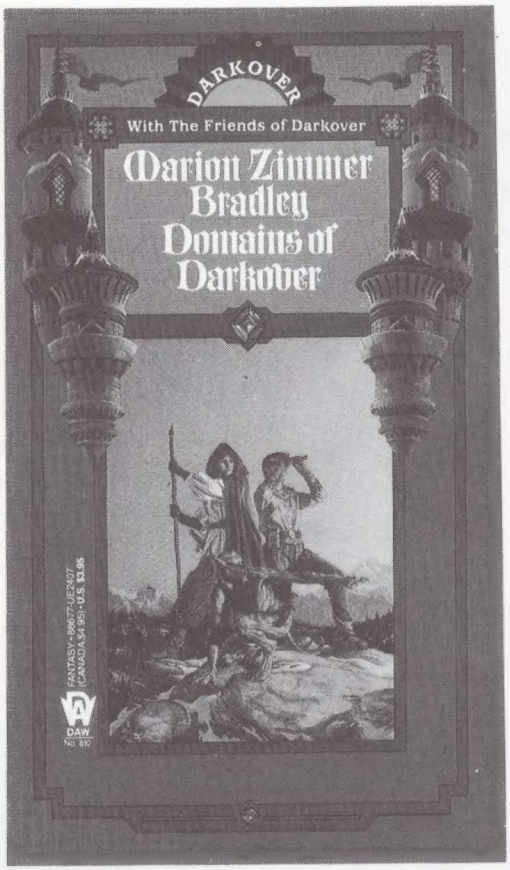
# DOMAINS OF DARKOVER

## Marion Zimmer Bradley

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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

# *FANTASY*

*Magazine*

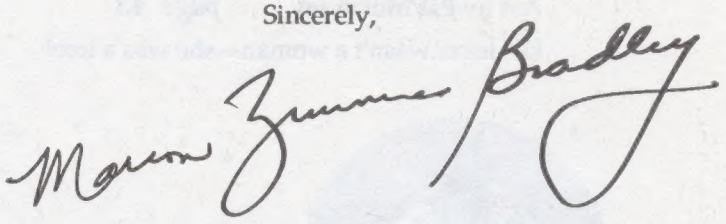
## EDITORIAL

Here's our Winter issue— full of stories to curl up with by the fire.

Our cover story, this time, is a peerless evocation of an old Norse saga— it even begins in the traditional style of such sagas. In the place of so-and-so there was such and such a man, and he was married to so-and-so, and he had X number of children ... After this description of time, place, and person, we get on with the story. All stories are not alike, nor do they demand slam-bang action at the outset. We thought it was a good idea to introduce you to some of the other ways of telling a story. And of course that's what it is all about, as Kipling said: *"There are 9-and-40-ways, Of constructing tribal lays, And every single one of them is right."*

People keep saying that every new issue is better than the last— how long can we keep it up? Well—that depends on you—and what kind of stories you send me. I greet every new day's haul of manuscripts with great enthusiasm—hoping to find a grand new cover story—in this issue we had at least three stories worthy to be cover stories. I always knew the great writers were out there somewhere—and you're proving it all over again every issue. So, keep the stories coming—I can't print them if you don't send them.

Sincerely,



Marion Zimmer Bradley

*P.S.* Jan's after me about aiming my editorial at readers—but I really feel that a reader is just a writer who hasn't started yet. I think there are a lot of you out there—so give it a try and prove me right.

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

# Fantasy Magazine

Issue 7 WINTER 1990

## *Cover Story* –
## The Hall of the Winter Folk

**by Stephen C. Fisher** *page 4*

**Art by George Barr**

Cover Art -George Barr

The strength and power of a Norse saga–a brilliant journey to vengeance!

## Where is the Great Spirit, Killing Rain?

**by Dayl Waldron**

**Art by Alicia Austin**

A beautiful fable of a search for the Great Spirit.

*page 32*

## Daughter of the Oak

**by David M. Shea**

**Art by Pat Morrissey** *page 43*

His lover wasn't a woman—she was a tree!

## Three Wizards

**by Keith Minnion**

**Art by James Balkovek**

A story of a young man's search for his roots—and of the strange things he found.

*page 58*

## Kill Dance 12
**by Mary A. Turzillo**
**Art by James Balkovek**
One of the strangest and most powerful stories I've read in a half century of reading fantasy. I really can't say much about this story, you'll have to read it.

## The Old Troll Comes to Town 20
**by Bob Liddil**
A teamster took a shortcut, that's how it all started. A tale of the old troll, with perhaps a lesson in manners!

## The Root of Magic 22
**by Elyse Guttenberg**
Two young would-be magicians would like to enter a school of magic– and instead, find themselves entangled in magic's very roots.

## The Night Bound 26
**by Cynthia Drolet**
**Art by Armand Cabrera**
A fine story of a kindness returned.

## The Fire Rider 29
**by Mary Frances Zambreno**
**Art by Diana L. Paxson**
A fine adventure story—to read to your kids if you have any. And if not, find a kid, any kid, to read it to.

## Heart's Desire 38
**by Patricia Duffy Novak**
**Art by James Balkovek**
A great many stories deal with the search for a wish. This one isn't what you expect.

## Crystal Lycanthrope 49
**by Lucy E. Carroll**
A strange and unusual story of a shape-changer. Be careful of those joking little signs that say "Beware, attack parakeet."

## The Pest 53
**by Beth Kitchens**
A stranger is not always—
maybe not often—
what she seems.

## Our Regular Features

Results of the Autumn Cauldron 21

LOOK WHAT'S COMING UP !!! 31

Darrell Schweitzer
Interviews
**Evangeline Walton** 36
A great lady of fantasy is here evoked by a young writer, himself a master of horror.

LETTERS COLUMN 42

CONTRIBUTORS 52
Meet the authors of our Winter Issue.

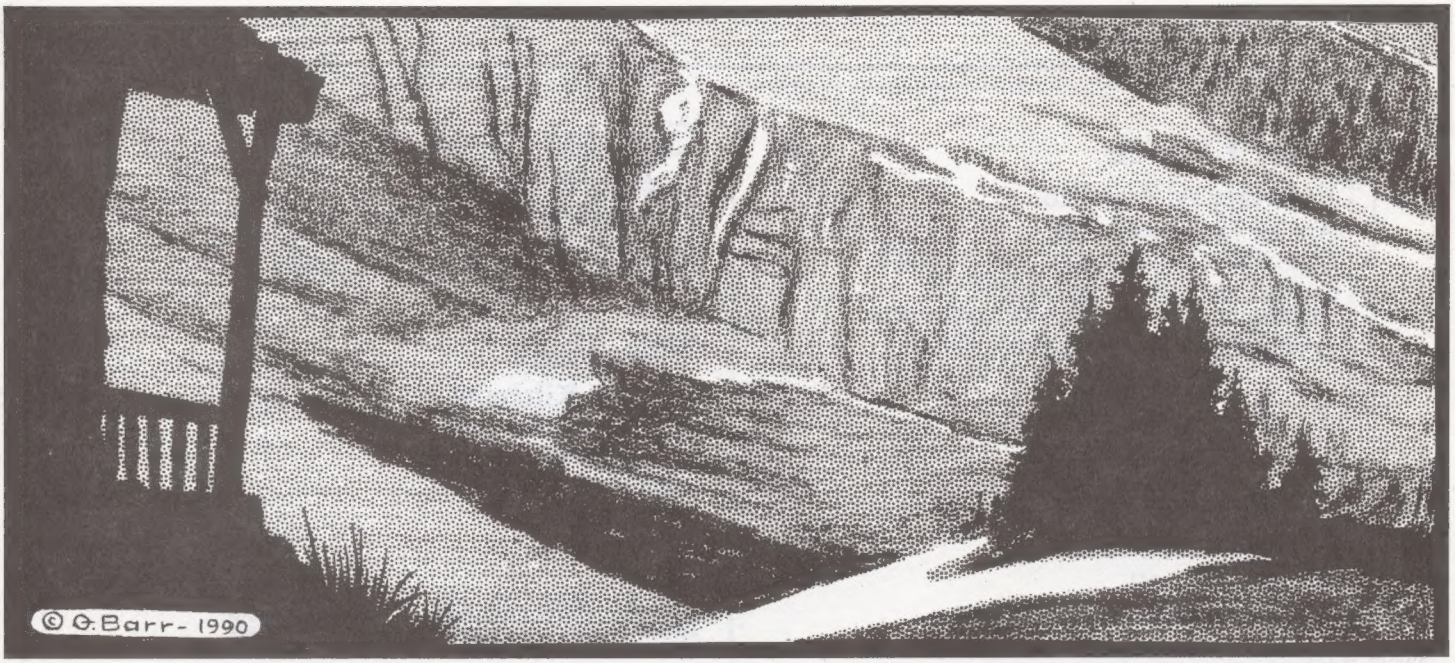
MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY 57
**TALKS TO WRITERS**
*" More Rejection ??? "*

Deadline Corner 56

THE CAULDRON 63
Special reader feedback–
your chance to voice your choice.

OUR FAMILY OF BOOKSELLERS 65

***Plus...***
**An Opportunity**
from **Andre Norton...** 10




# THE HALL OF THE WINTER FOLK

## *by Stephen C. Fisher*

There is a place high in the mountains known simply as the Valley to those who dwell there. As in many such spots, the inhabitants cleave to their own ways and have little to do with the outside world. Many in the Valley have gifts beyond those of ordinary folk, and those with skill at healing or discernment are well regarded. From time to time, however, one with greater power appears among them, though not always for the better. The people of the Valley believe—or perhaps remember—much that is not known elsewhere, particularly lore concerning powers that ruled this land in the time when the year was but one long winter. Mortals are best advised to leave those with great power to their own devices—but not everyone does well in this matter, and those who deal with them may cause much harm.

Winter comes early and stays late in the mountains. The folk of the Valley build snug houses with steep roofs to shed the snow, and make warm fur coats and woolen hose for both men and women. In winter they go about on what they call snowshoes, or skis. With such advantages, and with piles of rocks carefully situated to drop on unwanted visitors from the Lowlands, the mountain people keep their freedom. They pay tribute to no king, though their young men often seek their fortunes in the army of one or another Lowland ruler.

Aside from this, and other than the traders who come up from the Lowlands to buy cheese, woodcarvings, lace, woolen cloth and furs at the fairs in summer, the people of the Valley keep to themselves, content with what they have. There is work in plenty for everyone, and though none of them is rich, few lack food or clothing or a roof over their heads. Servants and masters toil side by side in the fields or the house, and speak as friends. They are honest, hospitable folk who spend their free hours in sport, dance, song, and the telling of tales—the last being a source of particular rivalry among them.

Once upon a time, though, there was a woman named Ussarin who was not happy with this existence. She was born to two servants in the house of Arridil, the largest landholder in the Valley. As a girl, she was often heard to remark that the day would come when she was the mistress rather than a servant. This earned her mockery from the other children and many a box on the ear from her mother, but no one at the time took it seriously. Ussarin's mother died of a fever when she was little more than a girl, and her father's second wife, who was not much older than she, was unable to deal with her—indeed, seemed to fear her.

When she was sixteen, Ussarin wed Kalefsil, son of Arridil. That a son of the master should marry a servant girl was not remarkable, but people did wonder that he would choose one who was graced by neither looks nor kindness. Still, Kalefsil was only the third son, and due to inherit only a small holding.

One day a few years later, Haldil and Moringil, Kalefsil's two brothers, went hunting together; and Moringil was slain by one of Haldil's arrows. It was thought an accident, since the two brothers were devoted to each other, and the elder had little to gain from the younger's death. The following spring, Haldil's two small children drowned while playing in a little boat on the river. Haldil, who had been the most cheerful of men, now became the most melancholy, and spent much time alone. One day he went by himself to fell a tree, and cut his leg open with the axe; he was dead when they found him. By this time Ussarin had borne three sons of her own to Kalefsil: Sordivil, Trifil, and Garithil; her position as future mistress of the farm was secure.

For a time she seemed content. Eventually, Arridil grew ill with some wasting disease and while Ussarin deferred to her father-in-law in his presence, she grew more tyrannical each day behind his back. On Arridil's death, she became so unbearable that her own father took his wife and left to join another household down the Valley, and many of the other servants also moved

out when the chance arose.

Ussarin and Kalefsil began to add to their holdings until much of the good land along the river was theirs. They would begin by offering a price for what they wanted which was low, but not unthinkable. At first they were refused, for few people of the Valley would willingly part with their land. However, fields that they desired grew barren, so the owners were eventually forced to sell to them out of impoverishment—and for less than they had been offered at first. Folk who had farmed their own land for generations were forced to take service with others, often with Ussarin and Kalefsil.

As their holdings increased, Ussarin and Kalefsil grew less and less like the other dwellers in the Valley. Arridil had been a hospitable man; Kalefsil now turned travelers away from his gates and set the dogs on them if they did not leave quickly enough. Neither he nor his wife worked but rather gave orders to their servants. They ate by themselves rather than at the common table, and they did not allow the servants to address them in a familiar way. Threats of beatings grew common in their household and were often carried out, especially when Kalefsil began to hire some of the more warlike young men to go around and enforce his wishes.

Worse than this, though, was Ussarin's way of dealing with those to whom she took a dislike. A neighbor had a silver brooch that had belonged to an ancestor and passed down for generations; Ussarin took a fancy to it. When the owner refused to sell, the livestock on her farm began to miscarry or give birth to monsters. Finally the woman herself bore a misshapen thing that did not live out the hour of its birth; only when she sent the brooch to Ussarin as a gift did the misbirths cease. Any servant woman with a pretty face—or, as Ussarin grew older and plainer, even an ordinary one with the freshness of youth—was liable to come down with some disfiguring illness.

Talk there was aplenty about this, but mostly in whispers. When something was said aloud about Ussarin, the speaker did not fare well. Perhaps it was an accident that drunken Oregil fell and broke his neck on an icy trail after denouncing Ussarin to her face, but it seemed strange to many that Bonidil, the storyteller of the Valley, should fall ill with a disease that reduced his voice to a whisper as he was creating a cycle of tales about the evil deeds of the witch Galtherin of years earlier.

Such was the state of things one winter's day when a woman named Amalin came down out of the hills to visit her sister Netharin. Amalin was the wife of Orandil, nephew of Arridil; she, her husband and his father lived on a small holding in the forest. Merry confusion greeted her when she opened the door, for her nieces and nephews thought her the finest person on earth, and may well have been right. Only after Idavil told of hunting with his father, and Popolin prepared a cup of steaming, fresh-brewed leth tea with leaves she picked herself "just this morning!," was Amalin able to have a private word with Netharin.

"Sister," she began, "I have had strange dreams lately, or perhaps the same strange dream several times."

Netharin nodded. She was known for her skill in unraveling such matters.

"Several times now I have seen a group of children coming toward me, crying, 'Mother, mother!' I turn to them and ask, 'Are you my children?' One of them says, 'Yes, we are yours, but your womb is closed to us and we shall never be born!' Then I awaken and cannot sleep again that night."

"And it is well with you and Orandil?"

"It is very well, sister. It is very well, save that we have no children, and that can only be my fault." Orandil's first wife, Katanan, had borne three children, though all died very young and she herself had died bearing the third. "Orandil could have set me aside four years ago for this, and yet he keeps me and will not hear of taking another wife. I grow old, sister—I am twenty-five now—and the children do not come."

Netharin reached out, placed one hand on her sister's forehead and sat in deep thought. It is a custom of the Valley that a marriage that has had no children after three years may be dissolved. Amalin married late—at eighteen she had been thought an old maid—and now, seven years later, was yet

# *The Hall of the Winter Folk*

childless. Netharin, six years Amalin's elder, had a houseful of offspring; her eldest sat by the fire as they talked, making the lace that would go into her own bridal clothing a year or two hence.

Netharin moved her hand to Amalin's stomach. "There is something wrong there, but I cannot tell what it is, or where it came from. You must seek one more powerful than I to help you."

"Where it came from I might guess, sister. You were there as well, at my wedding, when Ussarin handed me a cup of wine and so sweetly said, 'Welcome to the family, cousin.' Ever since then, when we see each other she greets me by asking if I am with child—always with a tender look on her face."

"'The serpent smiles that his venom may kill more surely,'" Netharin quoted. "I suspect the same as you. If I can find a way, I certainly shall, for who wounds my sister, wounds me."

So it was that Amalin hugged everyone and made her way into the forest as the afternoon shadows grew longer. Scarcely was she out of sight of her sister's house than clouds hid the sun and snow began to fall. As Amalin came to a meadow, the wind rose and the snow grew so thick that she could no longer see a tree or landmark, only her own tracks. When she reached the top of a ridge, even they disappeared, blown away by the wind. In a terrible moment she realized that she did not know which way to go. Acres of snow surrounded her. Without shelter she would surely freeze in the wind that whipped her from all directions. Though she knew of a hut in the corner of the field used by shepherds who tended the flocks in summer, it might as well have been on the Moon for the good it might do her.

Panic tried to seize Amalin, but she forced it away. Downhill she would find the forest. If she followed its edge, she would find either the hut or the trail. She clapped her hands to get feeling back into them and set out.

Amalin covered no more than a few yards before she stepped into a hollow full of snow so loose that her snowshoes simply dug into it and toppled her over. She picked herself up with some effort but was unable to get the snow out of her clothes. Knowing there was no more time to lose, she set forth again, but once more fell to the ground, her arms wrapped around her knees. When she tried to stand up again, the wind knocked her down. She called upon the Good Ones who give light and warmth and nurture all that lives, but the wind took the words away from her when they were barely out of her mouth. Anger came over her, and despair.

"Do not call upon them here," a voice said. Amalin looked up. It seemed to be lighter, though the snow was thick as ever. In front of her, half-seen in the storm, stood someone. "This is not their time. This is winter, and we rule again for a season."

"Who are you?" She no longer felt cold. I am numb now, she thought. This is what it is to die.

The figure appeared. "Call me Rior."

The name was outlandish, neither masculine nor feminine; neither the voice nor the appearance of this figure gave any clue as to its sex, if indeed it had one. "What do you want of me?"

"A service, for which I offer recompense. You have an enemy; so have I. Help me and I shall help you."

"And if I do not?"

"They will find you when it thaws. And if you promise to help and then break your word, we shall come for you, and our coming will be terrible indeed."

"It seems that I have little choice."

"Quite so, mortal; I have neither time nor desire to chaffer."

"What do you wish me to do?"

"Know, mortal, that your enemy Ussarin has sold herself to the Old Ones of the mountains. This is not well, but in doing so she has opened a gate through which others may pass. Know also that I and my people are not of the Old Ones, though like them we dwell in the ice and snow. We are sometimes called the Winter Folk. Once we ruled here, defeating the Old Ones after long struggle and making them do our bidding. When the world changed, it was decreed that we go north, where winter yet rules the year round. Few thought to resist the decree. We who stayed have suffered for our folly. In spring and summer we must hide while others rule our land; in winter we are strong, but the Old Ones are stronger yet. They have confined us to our ancient hall in the Cavern of Alazor and set Grimad, one of their number, to guard us.

"Tomorrow night, the first full moon of winter, the way into the cavern is open. Come with weapons and a companion or two as you see fit, remembering that warmth and life will serve you best in this. Follow the way into the mountain and cross the lake—there is a boat that will hold two or three of your sort. Kill Grimad so that we may join our kindred in the north. We in return shall grant what you most desire."

"I do not promise that I shall do this. But I shall try."

"That is well. Now come." Rior reached out and touched Amalin's shoulder. She stood up, her body suddenly filled with the pain that comes when flesh regains its feeling. Rior turned and began to walk away slowly, but left no impression in the snow. Amalin followed on her snowshoes across the meadow to the edge of the forest. Soon she recognized the place where her homeward trail entered the trees again.

"Tomorrow," Rior said, and was gone.

Amalin continued on her way through the forest, her body slowly returning to normal as her mind continued to reel. The Winter Folk and their war with the powerful but brutish Old Ones figured in many a tale told in the Valley, but she had not heard of Rior or Grimad before. The wind and snow slackened as she went so that by the time she reached her home, the air was still and clear.

Preoccupied with her thoughts, Amalin walked right into an ambush. With a wild whoop, a red-bearded, fur-clad figure sprang up behind the woodpile and began hurling snowballs at her. Two or three hit, covering her with a fresh layer of powder. A dog charged from around the end of the woodpile while Amalin's assailant jumped on top of it and yelled again, waving his arms in the air, then sprang to the ground, going over headfirst into a snowbank. Amalin hastily scrabbled in the snow and threw her first snowball at her foe as he got up, catching him in the face. "Aieee!" he cried and charged. Amalin hit him again, but he was upon her. He seized her and lifted her up, though she waved her snowshoes in the air and pummeled his head with her fists while the dog barked and wagged his tail with excitement. "Yield!" the man demanded.

"I yield, lackwit, I yield," she laughed. "Now help me get this snow off before I freeze. With you to look out for, perhaps it is well that I have no children."

"You look like you were in a snowball fight with Netharin's entire brood," Orandil told her as he brushed her clothes, "and perhaps fell into a snowbank in the bargain."

"I was caught in the storm."

"Storm? Those few flakes? Perhaps there was more up on the ridge, but scarcely anything to call by that name."

"There was snow up on the ridge, believe me," said Amalin, realizing that she had been in no natural weather.

Inside they busied themselves with their late-afternoon tasks. Orandil worked at preparing the skins of the animals he had taken that day; Amalin took the little knife that she kept at her belt and cut up two fresh-killed hares to make stew; while Toril the dog dozed at her feet. Hunting and trapping were the main sources of livelihood for the household, as their tiny field did not yield enough food for all. Yet they were happy. The marriage between Amalin and Orandil had been arranged, like many in the Valley, a pairing of a woman thought past her prime with a widower whose kinship to Ussarin and Kalefsil made few see him as a desirable match. A strange thing had happened, however: they had fallen in love. Had anyone told them so neither would have understood what the speaker meant, but anyone who saw how they looked at each other, or touched, would have known.

It was only after they were in their bed, that Amalin told her husband what had happened that afternoon. At first he was unwilling to hear, for like many men he thought magic to be a woman's business, either too unimportant or too important to concern him. As Amalin unfolded her tale, though, Orandil grew more attentive, and when she had done, he cursed Ussarin and Kalefsil for the evil they had wrought on them both.

"So," he said, "those two are so greedy that they attempt to take even this tiny holding from its rightful owners. I am of a mind to go down to their house with my axe this night and put an end to them both."

"Between their three sons and those brutes they hire to make the servants miserable, Alvedil the Bold would have trouble doing that by himself. You are deadly with a snowball, husband, but you should get some help before trying anything like that. In any case, if Ussarin is a witch, evil may well come to whomever makes an end of her, and what she has done to me will remain. Let us keep our tryst with Rior tomorrow night and then take further counsel."

"Alas, wife, you are too sensible. Though I had rather strike at the root of this evil and make an end of it, I agree with your words. Do you wish that we both go tomorrow? I will not stay behind, mind."

"Yes, I must certainly go, and I shall not attempt to dissuade you. I can take my bow and you your axe. Is there another we might bring?"

"Though neither of us is warrior, nor witch, I think it is we who must deal with it. I shall sharpen my axe in the morning."

Thus it was that as the next afternoon came to an end, Amalin and Orandil came upon the entrance to the Cavern of Alazor. They were high above the Valley, far from any human habitation at this time of year. Below, their homeland lay in shadow; if the darkness was deepest along the river where Ussarin and Karesdil lived, that may have just been a seeming that matched the reality. The peaks called the Great Ones, never trodden by mortal foot, glowed as with fire in the light of the setting sun as if to say, We are the true rulers here; We care not for Old Ones or Winter Folk or Mortals, but only for the Balance that is greater than all else.

In the east, the moon was already peering out over the distant peaks. It had been a hard climb other times in favorable weather, and lasted most of the short afternoon. Amalin had insisted that they share the work of breaking trail so neither was wholly exhausted. They were both glad to remove their snowshoes, and go into the cavern's mouth. They sat sheltered from the wind for a while, eating their supper and watching the stars come out.

"I feel very small up here," Orandil said.

"It is as if our troubles are of no account. And yet," she lifted her eyes to the stars, "see how the Hunter raises his club to slay the Bull. Are we not also fighting something wild that would destroy us?"

"True, oh wise woman. But the struggle goes on forever and we do not. I only hope your acquaintance of yesterday (being careful not to say Rior's name without good cause) knows enough of mortals not to have overmatched us."

"Do not fear," Amalin said, though she had the same doubt.

"I do not. And yet, wife, should it fall that I am not with you next dawn as you come down the mountain—"

"Enough!"

"Well—just that I am not the only man in the world, and would not have you spend the rest of your life—"

"The whole purpose of this is that we both come home, lackwit! And there may be other men in the world, but none like you."

"Perhaps. Certainly there is no other woman to match you for hardness of head!"

Orandil found his tinderbox and a torch; before he lit the brand, he took one last look at his wife and then at Orion the eternal Hunter, as if unable to decide which blazed the more brightly.

"This opening was certainly not here when I was here before," Orandil announced as he inspected the back of the cavern. Where at other times the cavern had gone only thirty feet into the mountainside, now the rear opened into darkness beyond. Orandil uncoiled a rope he had brought and tied one end around his waist.

"Smaller first," Amalin told him, tying the other end of the rope around herself. "Hold the torch high."

Slowly, carefully, each using one of the poles they used with their snowshoes to test the footing, they made their way down into the mountain's heart with Amalin in the lead. The path twisted until they had no sense of which way it was going, but it did not fork. Once they had to tie a rope fast and lower themselves down a steep stretch that offered no footing, and used an extra coil they had brought for that case. After a great while the cavern began to broaden out until they were able to walk side by side down a trail, admiring the strange beauty of the place.

"What is that sound?" Amalin asked.

"It sounds like a giant in pain. Grimad, more likely. What it might really be I do not know."

The sound grew louder. Suddenly a gust of wind caught them and blew out their torch. Both cried in alarm and grabbed for the other. Orandil drew his axe. They stood together in the dark for a long moment.

"Just the wind in a fissure," Orandil said at last. "Perhaps I can light the torch once more."

"Wait, husband. There is a light ahead. We may not need it."

"So there is. I had thought it a trick of my eyes."

They waited yet a while so their eyes could accustom themselves to the dimness. There were sparks of radiance in the rock, and ahead the light grew brighter.

"It might be just as well if we did not announce our coming so boldly," Orandil said softly, as they resumed their route more slowly.

If the cavern had been strange earlier, it was now like nothing in any mortal realm, with an alien loveliness that made both travelers tremble with something more than cold. The cavern grew larger and brighter; the bits of cold fire in the rock might have deceived their eyes, but their ears told them that they were in a large space with room for echoes.

They came over a rise and gasped

# *The Hall of the Winter Folk*

in awe. Before them, perhaps a quarter-mile away, stood a fantastic jeweled palace, glowing all colors in its own light. Far larger than any inhabited place Amalin or Orandil had ever seen before, it might have held as many as a thousand people. Folk in rich apparel walked or stood on the battlements as if taking the air, but no sound could be heard from them. Around the palace the ground glistened with yet more jewels. The two adventurers stood on a level with it; before them, however, the ground sloped down to a lake of clear, still water that reflected a twin of the palace. In the roof great gems had been set in the pattern of the winter constellations, so that had they not known they were deep inside a mountain, they might almost have thought themselves out of doors. What reassured them that they were in the cavern yet was the Moon, which was only a cluster of gems set in the likeness of a face, yet not quite a human face.

For a time they stood drinking in the scene, getting their bearings. Finally, without a word, they began to shed the gear they would not need for the final leg of their journey. Amalin readied her bow.

The silence was broken at last by a noise behind them. "Grimad!" whispered Orandil, as he hefted his axe. Amalin drew her bow. A light was visible, glowing with a color that was totally out of place in this eldritch realm. It came closer until it reached the top of the rise: a common lantern, held by a man of the valley. "Garithil!" Orandil said aloud.

"So it is you here, cousin?" replied the youngest son of Ussarin and Kalefsil. "And you, Amalin?"

"What brings you here?" Amalin demanded.

"The same errand as you."

Amalin and Orandil looked at one another in astonishment.

"Fear not, there are jewels enough for all of us lying loose on that island. All we have to do is gather them up."

"But how do you propose to deal with Grimad?" Orandil queried.

"Grimad?" Garithil asked. "Is he one of the folk that dwell in the palace?"

"He—or she—or it—is one of the Old Ones, the guardian of the hall. We came to slay him," Amalin explained.

Garithil was taken aback. "Well, cousins, you have my leave to do so, though I, for my part, merely wish to gather a sackful of jewels."

"You had best put out that lantern lest you alert him," Orandil said. "There is quite enough light here without it. Let us also speak more quietly."

Garithil put out his lantern and left it with the equipment Amalin and Orandil had discarded. They waited a moment for their eyes to readjust to the illumination.

"It's Sordivil this and Sordivil that," Garithil complained. "He's the apple of Mother's eye and can do nothing wrong. If it's not him, it's Trifil. It makes me vomit. I heard Mother and Sordivil planning this journey when they thought they were private—Sordivil was to come back with a king's ransom. Then last night she told him that something was afoot and he would have to wait until next year. So, I thought, here's my chance to win my fortune—and if my family doesn't give me my due for that, then it's off to the Lowlands for me, where they appreciate such things."

After a moment they began to descend the slope, wary alike of the footing, and of the unknown danger ahead.

"Who's that?" Garithil asked as they reached the shore of the lake. "Can this be your Grimad?"

"The Old Ones are human in form but greater in statures," replied Orandil. "This one is our size. He does not move. It is as if—"

"He is frozen," Amalin said to finish the sentence. They approached the figure cautiously. At its feet was a boat made of some unfamiliar dark wood with a pair of oars lying inside. The still figure stood at the edge of the lake as if ready to push the boat into the water.

The figure did not move as the trio came around to look him in the face. It was clad as a man of the Valley, his features bearing an expression of surprise. "I have seen him before," Orandil muttered. He touched the figure with a cautious finger. "Of course! Ymiril! He disappeared one winter's day when I was a boy and his body was never found. That would have been before either of you were born. Now I am going gray in the muzzle and he hasn't aged a day– though I do not think I would trade places with him. It looks as if he set one foot in the water to launch the boat and then tried to draw it back– too late. A lesson not to touch the water of this lake unless one wishes to remain here."

"Husband, does it not seem to you that the Moon and the stars have moved since we first saw them?"

"I think they keep pace with the motion of the true heavens. It is past midnight now. We must get to our business quickly, for I would not remain here when dawn breaks."

"Nor I," said Garithil. "The boat will hold three, though only one may row."

"I have never rowed a boat before, but I can try," Orandil volunteered.

"I'll do it," Garithil told him. "I have been out on the river many times. Amalin, go to the front and keep lookout. I'll sit in the middle and row. Orandil, you push us off and jump in the rear." Amalin gingerly went to the bow and sat on a thwart while Garithil fitted the oars into the oarlocks. "Now," he said, sweeping the oars back as Orandil pushed the boat into the water and leaped aboard. The water shimmered with a million glittering lights as the waves of their passage roiled its surface. From somewhere they heard a ringing noise, as if someone had struck a bell of finest silver. As the boat reached the halfway point, the ringing became almost deafening.

"I do not think our arrival will be as secret as we hoped," Orandil said.

"I see him," Amalin said. "A figure like a man, but greater, seemingly made of ice, coming with great leaps to the edge of the lake."

"Grimad at last. Look! He has picked up a boulder and is getting it ready to throw," Orandil added.

"We have no chance. I'm going back," said Garithil, looking over his shoulder and beginning to turn the boat.

"No!" commanded Orandil, half rising and hefting his axe. "You came this far uninvited; it's too late to change your mind now. He could sink us easily while you're rowing back." They were but a few yards from shore.

"Sit down! You'll spill us all!" Garithil cried.

The Old One threw the boulder. It fell beyond the boat but splashed water which froze instantly. A few drops hit Amalin's face, burning as if they were molten lead, leaving little scars. Amalin rose halfway to her feet, bracing her knees against the gunwales, and put an arrow to her bow.

"Sit down!" Garithil screamed.

As Grimad raised a second boulder, Amalin fired.

"Well shot, wife!" Orandil cried. Grimad dropped the boulder on his own head as he grabbed at an arrow that had lodged, quivering, in one of his massive arms. He toppled over.

"An easy shot at this range," Amalin said, sitting down again, "if this boat weren't moving so. Call it luck."

Garithil ran the boat onto the shore

with a few swift strokes. It wedged in some rocks. "Hop out and pull us up further." Amalin complied. Garithil and Orandil stepped ashore. "That was one ride I never wish to repeat." He took a leather bag from his belt. "Now, my reward."

Garithil hastened up the slope and began to scoop up gemstones. He looked up once or twice to reassure himself that the others were not taking the boat away. Amalin and Orandil had no such intention; they were cautiously approaching the place where Grimad had fallen.

There was movement. "I thought it was too easy," said Orandil. "He hit himself on the head, which probably did no damage at all." Grimad raised himself to his feet and charged Orandil with lowered head. Orandil brought his axe down squarely on the Old One's translucent skull: momentum carried Grimad onward, knocking Orandil down. Meanwhile Amalin fired arrow after arrow into her target until he seemed to be sprouting feathered twigs.

Grimad and Orandil picked themselves up. Once more the Old One charged. This time Orandil sidestepped, swinging his axe into one of Grimad's legs. The iron head of the axe shattered like glass, leaving Orandil with the handle in his hands and a disbelieving expression on his face. Amalin reached for another arrow and found none: her quiver was empty.

Grimad charged again. Orandil raised the axe handle in defense but seemed to have trouble doing even that; strength had left his body. Grimad smashed a huge fist down on him and Orandil crumpled to the ground, his skull crushed.

"Garithil!" Amalin cried.

"Too late!" came the reply.

She looked back to see Garithil launching the boat, leaping in, and grabbing the oars. There was no help there, or even escape.

"Rior!"

"I cannot aid you." The reply came to her clearly though the speaker, she realized, was standing on the wall of the palace. "You must face him yourself. That which is cold and lifeless can do him no real harm; only warmth and life can kill him."

Something rose up within Amalin. She looked once more at the remains of one who had been full of joy and laughter a moment ago, and all the love that had been within her boiled up into rage. She reached into her clothing, and pulled out the only weapon left to her, the knife in her belt. She bared her left wrist, drove the blade in, and brought it forth red with her blood. Even as Grimad hefted a boulder to throw at Garithil's boat, Amalin charged.

Amalin was not a big woman, and Grimad was so huge that she barely came up to his waist. She brought the knife down with all her strength, striking the Old One about where a man's kidney would be.

For an instant they stood thus. Suddenly, from the puncture of Amalin's knife, cracks spread through Grimad's form. Pieces of him began to fall and he finally collapsed in a heap of icy shards. Amalin sank to the ground. Striking Grimad had drained the strength from her body and her spirit as it had Orandil's. She sat there, right arm numb, and only a void within her, as one by one the stars in the roof of the cavern began to go out.

Winter Folk were standing around her. They had the form and size of human beings, but were pale of skin and hair and had a not-quite-human cast to their features. They were richly dressed, but neither their forms nor their clothing marked them as male or female. One of them was holding a cup to Amalin's lips. "Drink."

Amalin did as she was bidden. She could not identify the liquid in the cup, but though it was cold, it brought life back into her. "Just to touch Grimad would have been enough to drain the life from most mortals," the cupbearer said. "Only one in whom its fires burned high indeed could deal him a death blow and live. You chose well, Rior."

"Long have we waited for one such to come. Hail Amalin, who has set us free!"

The Winter Folk repeated the accolade in their strange voices.

Amalin rose unsteadily to her feet. Her left arm was useless, her right not much better. She was exhausted, beyond that she was filled with the dire realization that the one who had been her husband lay in a heap on the floor of the cavern. Triumph was the furthest thing from her mind.

Two of the Winter Folk came with a terrified Garithil between them. When Grimad died the lake had frozen; Garithil's boat had been trapped halfway across.

"Hail, Garithil, who aided in our deliverance," Rior said.

"What do you want of me?" stammered Garithil.

"We wish to give you our thanks and send you on your way. On foot you could not return to the outside before dawn seals the entrance."

Garithil said nothing.

"Name your reward," Rior invited.

"I just wish leave to depart with these stones I found."

"Do you wish nothing more than that?"

"Garithil!" Amalin cried, suddenly brought to herself. "Orandil saved you from Grimad! Can you not ask for them to bring him back to life?"

"I came for the stones and I will take them," Garithil replied, suddenly more assertive.

"If that is your desire, so be it. Duir will take you behind him to the cavern's mouth."

Some of the Winter Folk were leading or riding horses out of the palace. The horses resembled mortal steeds as much and as little as their masters resembled human folk; they wore no harness except for some that bore hampers as if they carried provisions for a journey. One of the riders pulled Garithil up behind him and they were off in an instant, moving with a speed no mortal horse could match, up a trail no mortal horse could have followed at any pace.

"Amalin, name your desire and we shall grant it."

Amalin looked at the Winter Folk around her and at Orandil's body on the ground. "Can you return my husband to life?"

"We may summon him. Whether he will come only the stars know, but his spirit is not long fled. Do you give over your wish that we open your womb in favor of this?"

Amalin did not hesitate. "Yes."

"This will cost us more than we had thought to pay with a long journey ahead of us, but we do not chaffer with mortals. The price is fair. It shall be done.

A group of the Winter Folk gathered in a circle around Orandil and raised their hands. They began a chant of summoning in a language no mortal knows, though its import was clear to Amalin. Slowly, they began to lower their hands until they touched Orandil's body. There was a flicker like a bit of marshfire at that moment.

Orandil stirred and raised himself. "Wife? Did you call me?"

"Husband!" she cried, hurling herself on him, embracing him as best she could with one arm. Orandil rose, shaky but whole, helping Amalin up with him.

"Hail Orandil, who has suffered much on our behalf!" said Rior. "Will you ask a reward of us?"

"Tell me first if those whom I met and who urged me to heed your summons to return here were truly our children-to-be."

"Yes."

"If that be so, then I wish that they

## *The Hall of the Winter Folk*

indeed come to be born." Orandil turned to Amalin. "They seem a likely bunch," he grinned, "even if some of them do favor me too much."

"You wish that more than you wish revenge on your cousin?" Rior asked. Though Rior's face showed no human expression, there was an undercurrent of laughter in the voice.

"Yes."

"So be it. And you shall have your revenge, too, for ere winter is over all the evil Ussarin has wrought shall return on her head and she shall be brought utterly to nought."

Rior mounted a horse. "May I ask that Amalin the Deliverer honor me by riding with me, and that her husband likewise honor my companion Voreth?"

Amalin had never ridden a horse before, but she nodded assent. One of the other Winter Folk helped her to mount behind Rior, while Voreth took Orandil as passenger. The steeds leaped forward, covering many yards in a stride, though the riders felt no more of an impact than if they had been trotting gently through grass. Behind them came the main body of the Winter Folk, leaving their glittering hall deserted as the last of the jewels overhead winked out. They covered the distance back to the entrance in a few wild minutes.

At the cavern's mouth they paused. The moon was low in the west and there was a faint light in the east, though the stars were still visible. "Garithil left us a going-away present," Orandil commented, gesturing at their snowshoes, which had been smashed to pieces. "He did this before he followed us into the cavern, though, if I read his tracks aright."

"I could not have gone down on them anyway, husband," said Amalin, "with one arm injured."

"It will be a long walk."

"No," said Rior, "you are not strong enough to make your way down, and will not be fully healed until you have felt the sun at midsummer. We must be well on our way to the north before the sun rises, but we can take you to your home first."

Now the main body of the Winter Folk gathered on the mountainside. One last rider came out of the cavern. "All are here!" Behind him there was a ringing that Amalin and Orandil knew for the closing of the portal at the back of the cave.

"To the True North, then!" cried Rior, and the cavalcade set off, leaving only Rior and Voreth behind. The dizzying speed of their ride through the cavern was only a fraction of what the steeds could do in the open air, where they could take miles in a bound.

As light was spreading across the sky, they came to rest in the yard of Amalin and Orandil's house. "Farewell," Rior said as the two mortals dismounted.

"And are you gone never to return?" Amalin inquired.

"We may come back from time to time on the wings of a winter storm. When the world changes again, perhaps this realm will be ours once more. But whatever may pass, we shall remember your deeds on our behalf."

Then the Winter Folk were gone. Toril was at the door to welcome his master and mistress home.

The jewels Garithil brought home that day melted to a puddle of water within the hour. Soon thereafter he quarreled with his brother Trifil, slew him, and went away in great haste never to be seen again. Before winter was out there was even more startling news: cries were heard in the house one night and the servants found Ussarin and her other son Sordivil dead, slain by Kalefsil, who stabbed himself before anyone could stop him. No one knew for sure what had caused this, though dire things were rumored.

With Kalefsil and his sons dead, all that he and Ussarin had owned went to Rogil. That spring, Rogil, Amalin, and Orandil moved into his house and restored the fruits of Ussarin's evildoing to their rightful owners, keeping for themselves only what had belonged to Rogil's brother Arridil. The young men whom Kalefsil had hired to bully the servants fled to the Lowlands; few ever came back. Life in the Valley returned to normal. Even Bonidil the storyteller recovered his voice and used it to recount the tale of Amalin and the Winter Folk.

As for Amalin and Orandil, folk found them graver than they had been before their adventure, yet no less merry. It was indeed midsummer before they were fully healed from their fight with Grimad.

Though Amalin was to bear little scars on her face life-long, not long thereafter Amalin felt life quickening within her, and the following spring she bore a son. In later years brothers and sisters joined him, bringing their parents both more grief and more joy than they could have expected, as children will. Their descendants still dwell in the Valley.

❧ *Stephen C. Fisher*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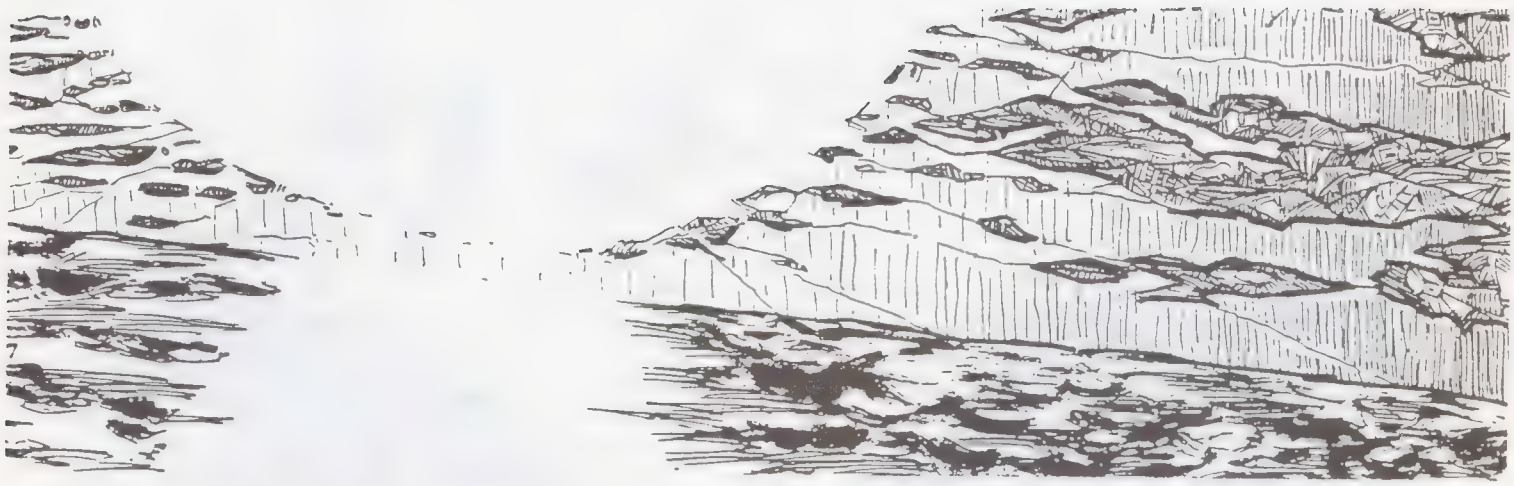

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# THE DAWN OF A NEW BREED OF MAGAZINE

JAMES BALKOVEK

# *Kill Dance*

by Mary A. Turzillo

*H*unt danced beautifully-- high as a star, quick as electricity. But Silver's answer was still no.

"Why?" His eyes shone bright, almost the color of flame, and the flesh above his beak was read, an accent to his regal profile.

"You know why," said Silver, drawing her taloned writing hand into her breast feathers. She still would not wear the silver jess bells he had sent her from the north.

"A dance is not an egg." He bated angrily, nearly losing his grip on the ledge.

"With you, Hunt, a dance may well end in an egg. And I won't be wanting eggs until I've settled this matter of honor."

"Silver," he said, very quiet, "the love months are halfway gone. They'll be over by the time you find Golden and defend your honor." His gaze flicked away. "You're beautiful. Even your devotion to honor is beautiful. But there are women in the sky today without lovers. I'm not blind."

She extended her wings, bated a powerful downstroke, folded them again. "I told you not to call me Silver. My name is Jessless."

Jessless was a common given name among the Skybreaker Gathering. It meant, "With no master but the Skybreaker." A year ago, Hunt had joined the gathering as Silver's pupil. His own twin had died in the egg, so he was not obliged to settle old debts of honor by challenging the "usurper," as Skybreaker Gatherers called their twins. They believed their world Aeyrrhi was growing overpopulated, that population should be controlled naturally by allowing the elder of two twins to kill the other in the nest, as happened with the lower species and with backward families, as in prehistory. Through Silver, Hunt had learned these doctrines. But his faith had ebbed. Yes, there were too many of his kind. Sport and work facilities often drove lower species into thew high mountains. But Hunt shrank from the thought of watching his own two children (if he and Silver ever had any) tear each other to shreds.

"Perhaps," he said levelly, "Jessless only means uncivilized."

"I knew you didn't believe," she said, jerking her head away. "You've been humoring me. You're no different from the silly, soft glovewearers."

Hunt knew she wanted him to protest his fidelity to the Gathering. It seemed more important to her than his faithful, frustrated courtship. He raised his hand before her. He was wearing a flying glove, a soft new one. His family had been sensible people, who had always seen that he had the best food, comfortable ledges, the best Mentor, and, yes, the best flying glove. And what would have happened if his twin had hatched and tried to kill him? They would have put one brother up for adoption. His experiences with this lovely fanatic girl began to make that look like sense.

He bated again, lofting into the air and tightening the flying glove. Silver extended her own unclipped, ungloved hand. It was too much. "You're right," he screamed. "Tell the Gathering! I am apostate. And now I'm going to find myself a real wife!" He beat upward, high above her, then swooped past the ledge again.

"With jesses!" he yelled.

She tucked a jessless wrist into her breast feathers and watched him wheel northerly, out of her family sky, until he was less than a speck.

Silver was stunned. They had played this game before, but she always thought that his faith, though less than hers, was firm, that he believed because she did, that he would stay with her until she had settled this matter of Blood Trial. Eventually, she would wear his silly jess bells. And if they had eggs, anything could happen. She would hate seeing a Blood Trial, a full-scale battle, between two razor-beaked babies, especially if they were her own, but maybe something would happen. Maybe she would only have one egg the first time. Maybe one egg would accidentally roll out of the nest. She might even help it a little.

The real problem was her own, real, grown-up sister.

*D*ance's family sky was blinding with spring loveliness this afternoon. As a child, she had imagined the day when she would return, a woman, to survey the family sky from this vantage. It was her favorite nest. And Scan had improved the nest so, with plumbing, storm shutters, a light-weight roof of wooden struts, leaves, and fabric, and his great pet, electricity for heat and light. It was shady inside the nest; she had rolled the awning forward so that she could drowse, too sleepy to read or write letters.

For a child adopted by an elderly, barren couple, Dance had done well. Her career as a Comforter had gone well; Catch Vixen, her patient for the last two years, had improved so much, and had gifted her with rings, jesses,

# KILL DANCE

and glove ornaments, plus gaming rights in her family sky. In a letter, Catch Vixen had hinted that she might also be a wife this season. Dance's Mentor, Praise, had been so pleased that she had sent Dance home early for the love months. And her old friend Scan had also grown the light-colored, mature feathers. She had prophesied right, when in childhood she had thought they might be lovers. He was a lusty, graceful dancer, full of humor, surprises, passion. And now she brooded two creamy speckled eggs.

But she was lonely right now. Business was supposed to stop when the love months were this far along, but Scan had volunteered to steer a dirigible north, where lumber was needed to repair an ancient nest which, after years and years of occupancy by a venerable family, had collapsed of its own weight.

Dance drowsed. She dreamt of the day of her marriage. Scan had rested the day before on an open mountain, preened and adorned with jess trinkets. He had come at evening to hunt. He had observed where the family ground turkeys nested, stalking them quietly, picking one out for the wedding feast. She saw him there in her family sky, though he floated silently on thermals, never opening his throat.

In the dream, as in her memory, she waited all the next morning for him. Tradition was that he would come when least expected. She oiled her glove and waxed the gauntlet, twisting greenery around its wrist. From her talon wrist dangled a gold jess with ornate bells and rainbow ribbons. Occasionally she would slip off the ledge and wheel slow circles, then light and rest again on the highest point on the floor of her sky, riffling her wings, spreading them to cool them or to bask in the late winter sun.

Then she saw the far speck. She whipped her head about, alert, scanning the whole sky. The sky-born dot was vales away, a mote to rodent or simian eyes, when she recognized the streaks in the fair belly-feathers, the characteristic flight gestures.

As the dream went on (she knew she was dreaming, but settled in luxury to finish the dream), she screamed welcome, crouched, and launched into the air. Scan screamed back his love and folded his wings, plunging down and down and down before he pulled out of his first display. She cried out a strong, gay laugh for his aerial skip, and again as he climbed, rolling, flaunting strength and joy. She beat harder upward, and gained his height.

Together, in her dream as in her memory, they flew, wingtips almost touching, sometimes brushing. He began a dive and she followed; he began to dive and rise, dive and rise; she followed his undulating pattern, her wingtips never more than a talon from his. He threw off his flying glove and beat upward, ahead of her, luffing in the wind. She stripped off her glove and tossed it down, noticing where it landed, far, far below, on rocks, amid blue winter flowers.

She rolled, turned, and began flying on her back. Scan, now behind and above her, drew in his wings and dove toward her. She extended her talons up toward him and he locked hands with hers. Together they flew, face to face, she upside down. Slowly, Scan started a roll. She yielded her weight outward, still soaring upside down. The two began to cartwheel through the sky.

Her silk-and-beaded jess ribbons tangled in his talons. He laughed and pulled away, nearly tearing the elaborate jewelry. She rolled upright into soaring position and flaunted under him. Before she sensed his intention, he pulled in his wings and mantled her, making real love now.

They plunged through the cold sunlight, tumbling, locked in love, heedless of their airy fall. And consummated their union, only a span from the rocks of the meadow. And spread wings, beating upwards, defying death with courtship and love.

Dance stirred in her dream.

The eggs under her were too warm; she balanced on her talon hand and turned them to a cool side. Scan had installed an electric incubator. Aside from the discomfort of a hot brood patch, Dance could almost have gone with Scan. But a broody sleepiness had overtaken her, along with maternal possessiveness.

Her wings felt cramped. When the eggs had first been laid, and she was light again, knowing the eggs to be fertile, children of hers and Scan's, she felt free, empty like a leather jess wallet. She had left Scan warming the new eggs and flapped all around the canyon and far down river. Then, suddenly protective, she had streaked back upriver and pushed him off them. Scan had been amused.

Now she extended her wings a little, pushing feathers lightly against the egg cup wall. Stretch any further and she would break a feather. She'd have to get somebody to come up and imp it for her. Self-coddling, she preened, wishing she had some scented oil left. Maybe Scan would think to bring a jar.

The wind, she noticed, was picking up. It was northerly. It might hasten Scan back a day sooner. Fast-blown clouds dappled the sunlight; she huddled closer to the eggs. It would not snow, surely, but it would be a cloudy afternoon, and colder, too. Eyes half-closed, she dreamed again, dreams less to her liking, dreams of struggling, of combat with a lower bird. She dreamt she had gone to hunt for the babies' dinner, a small turkey hen. She had picked it out and flushed it, on it too close to back off, when it flew at her, slashed at the flesh above her beak, at her eyes. A huge hawk, frantic to kill. She closed with it, grappling it behind the head. But it turned and squeezed her own neck.

She jolted awake. The day had turned cold; the light-weight roof rattled in the wind. Turning the incubator on, she ambled toward the front of the nest.

There was a speck in her sky.

It was not Scan.

A long time Silver, who called herself Jessless, stood in the Skybreaker shrine. But for her slightly erect hackles, she seemed enraptured in meditation. Her glove hand, naked, was drawn up into the plumage of her breast; her eyes were fixed on the twin figures in the icon above. She was unadorned now, except for the single slash of paint on her writing-side cheek, the mark of childhood, for she was virgin, old enough for a husband, but denying herself for the sake of her mission, her Blood Trial. She also wore a slash of paint on her talon-side cheek, red, extending her eye. The meaning of that mark was holy, secret. It was called the Mark of the Elder, but Silver's was for a younger twin bent on redressing a wrong, the wrong of having been denied her trial of childhood.

After a long time, she extended her glove hand and placed it on the head of the sacrificed rabbit doe. Her talons, grown too long to write or manipulate tools of any trade, so long that she needed no flying glove to grasp perches or hunt her own food, those talons fit around the skull of the doe. She squeezed; the skull cracked; blood ran on the shrine's floor.

Even as the Skybreaker will on the last day take the egg of Aeyrrhi in his talons and crush it like a clod of dirt, thought Silver. He will heed me. It will surely be his will that I so crush the breast cage of the sister who should never have lived. He will surely mantle

in joy over this sacrifice, over the body of the Usurper, my twin. He will grant me the victory. He will surely be pleased with me. A small voice, a bit like Hunt's, said, But you were the younger. You live only by chance. But that voice was only in her head. She paid no attention to it.

When the messenger came, Dance had been nearly awake. She realized her strange dreams came from two things; the rising wind and a tiny sound within one egg: the first callings of her first-born. Mama, Mama, it called. Then it would rest. Then it would strain against the shell and call again, Mama, Mama. It was beginning to crack a tiny hole in the shell. The entire hatching would take two days, while the baby strengthened and grew vigorous from its struggles.

But somebody was outside– not Scan– different flight gestures altogether. But somebody she knew. She found her glove and, without putting it on, crossed the crooked flooring. She spoke soothingly to the unhatched chick, then dropped from the front of the nest ledge and climbed upward. The talon blades of the glove clanked in the wind, and she drew it on and fastened it with her talon hand as she flew. It felt stiff; she hadn't worn it for almost a day.

Yes, the intruder was someone she knew; Hover, from her Mentor's sky, a Glovemaker Gatherer who waited on the blind Mentor. "Friend," Hover cried over the wind. Dance pitched forward, beating faster to meet him.

"It's Praise," he said, breathless with fighting the wind, now that they planed together, spiraling downward.

"Is she dying?" Dance cried. "Did she send to say goodbye?"

"No," Hover answered. "It isn't her. It's you. She says, 'Beware. Fight to the death, because she means death to you.'"

The wind drove Dance back. Hover tossed a parcel to her and she nearly missed it in her surprise.

"Don't try to fly to Praise," Hover screamed. "Come afterward, if you can. Be careful!" He extended wings and beat awkwardly upward, now against beginning rain.

Dance labored upwards, wings straining, to a familiar dead tree. She lit there, squeezing the wood with her sharp glove blades, holding the package with her talon hand, unnatural reversal. Be careful, Hover had said. He was flying gracelessly now, swiftly north again. The rain might down him, but he'd left the message. Perhaps the blind Mentor Praise was after all dying, or he'd have invoked hospitality. But no. Hover had always been proud, chaste and alone more than the laity of the Glovemaker Gathering.

The short flight back taxed her. Rain drizzled off her feathers on the uneven flooring in the front of the nest. The roofing, flimsy though it was, kept the nest dry. Dance took off her glove, closed the shutters, and returned to the eggs. They were warm, slowly turning. Scan had made a good incubator. The elder egg was quiet, the chick resting between calls.

The sodden parcel Hover had brought was a message, kept dry with waxed rags.

She read:

No time for tact. Yes, this is a blood matter. I invoke the Glovemaker's true name; you know it was Kill-near-the-Eyrie. You know the story: how he himself, in blind infant rage, killed his twin. How when he married, his own elder child killed the younger, then died of its wounds. How his wife dove onto rocks, killing herself in mourning. How then he called himself Glovemaker, implying one who brings civilization. Do not forget this, Dance! Blood Trial was instinct even with the Glovemaker!

Among the Skybreaker Gathering, one rises as an adult to fight the Blood Trial she was denied as a child. This one is Silver, the younger sister whose older twin was given to strangers to adopt, that the two might not kill one another. Silver would now fight that primal battle. She seeks her sister. Silver is strong, clever, and dangerous, Dance.

Still I call you Dance. Do you not know that sometimes in the naming-game, parents name twins in two consecutive throws? The names, then, come out so people know the two are twins. For your own good, the naming-game was played a second time for you by your foster parents, and you were named Dance. But the first time the game was played, by your first parents, you had a different name. I know that name, and I have kept it secret. But now, in this blood matter, I tell you your true, first name. You were called Golden.

Silver is your younger twin. She means to kill you today or tomorrow. Do not let her. Strike first if you can. Forget your pacifism. She will make no peace with you. You are nest-bound, brooding, and cannot escape. She will die, or you will.

I am tired. Hover waits to carry this. A storm is coming.

Dance's pinions prickled. How would she know this Silver? Her twin? Yet paint and circumstance might hide resemblances. Better to harry off anyone who came uninvited.

Dance's brood sleepiness was upon her; she missed Scan. Perhaps his errand was concocted by Skybreaker Gatherers. For protection against such violence, there were ritual peacekeepers, Glovemaker Gatherers, but in a society so ritually territorial that there was no word for war, violence was rare, always personal, and considered a blood matter, to be settled within the family where it arose.

Aeyrrhi was not a violent world, but if you were determined, it was very easy to murder someone.

Back in her nest, Dance composed and sent telegrams to her neighbors. It was not good to involve strangers in blood matters, but she was frightened and defenseless.

She wrote to Scan. Later, she would carry the letter to the post at the other end of her sky. Anyway, since he was steering a lighter-than-air vehicle, the message could reach him only by chance. The elder egg called briefly, then seemed to fall asleep. Exhausted, Dance pulled the shutters closed against the wind, and tried to sleep.

In her dream, she was playing a children's game of drop-stone-and-dive. She was very good at it. She had better be good, because the stones were eggs.

Silver spent the morning in exercise. She played the stone game with a quick novice, faster than she was because he was male and therefore smaller, but she did well, missing only once during the entire morning. The Gathering knew her special mission of the next day, so after a short noon rest she had a fresh practice opponent for unarmed combat. This was another woman, older and well-muscled. Not as fast as her morning's opponent, but strong and full of cunning. Silver had chosen to specialize in Skytalon, a form of aerial combat, but she was familiar with several wrestling techniques to be used with a grounded combatant– or one who had grounded her. Her practice opponent, Rends-Horse-Sinew, was more versatile and clever with the cunning of middle age, but speed carried the day, and Silver triumphed. They played with thin leather gloves, of course, to avoid slashes or stab wounds. The older woman had not sharpened her talons, but Silver kept hers at razor points.

Again Silver rested. The games-sky was bright all forenoon and the floor of the sky dusty. A wind was rising. Silver threw dust on herself, then preened it off quickly. The coaches, after consulting with a Mentor, had decided her afternoon practice would be ground combat, wrestling. She reviewed

# KILL DANCE

quickly in her mind the style she had studied, aware that her opponent might be, like Rends-Horse-Sinew, skilled in several styles.

The opponent this time was a man, large and strong for a man. His bearing reminded her of Hunt. His name was Laugh-at-Distance, but he was from the south, and his size gave him advantage.

He was expert, it turned out, at the style she herself had studied. Both wore light gloves, but when he lashed out at her with a thumb-talon, she staggered, and the pain made her wonder if she had been cut. She was allowed, by the rules, to flutter a few talons above the ground, and she did so immediately, to return his attack. She felt she must score points soon, or lose the match– bad omen on the eve of her blood match. Slightly aloft, she grappled with him. He rolled on his back, steadying himself with his wings, and returned her clasp by taking hands full of her breast feathers. The rules forbade tearing her flesh, but he had scored a point, and they were forced to separate. Silver felt a chill.

She took the next point by hitting him with a talon hard enough to knock him down. Winded, he asked for time out. Silver was pleased. She could have disengaged from his feather-pulling, and she was too fast to allow him purchase on her breast-cage. Her own blow had been timed too slowly to stun him, but she congratulated herself that he needed time out.

Then Laugh and Silver circled each other, feinting with talons. Laugh was quick, but not quick enough, she thought. Just then, he squatted and leaped into a glove-hand charge– or what looked like a glove-hand charge. As she came up and turned to block his glove hand, he corkscrewed into the air and landed on her neck. For a moment, she panicked. Then her training came to her, and she rolled forward, jarring the unprepared Laugh's beak. They rolled in the dust, until judges separated them.

Silver was sure she had torn a ligament in her talon hand, and considered asking the match called off. On any other day, she would have risked further injury, but she did not want to postpone the Blood Trial tomorrow. She was sweating and shivering in the chill, gusty, wind. Rain began to threaten. Then Laugh went to the judges and asked that the match be declared a tie. He said he thought he might have a concussion from the force of hitting the sky floor when Silver threw him.

Though relieved, Silver was not sure a tie match was a good omen for a match of the eve of settling blood-business. At that the judges conferred and gave her the victory. Laugh refused to go on, they said, so she was the winner.

Silver dipped her head and body in a winner's curtsy, and Laugh dipped his deeper forfeit curtsy, reminding her again of Hunt. Hunt, though, never liked to fight. But the curtsy looked so like courtship. If only Hunt were here! She was sure he would be moved by her skill and daring, not to speak of her feminine grace. A worthy woman to bear his eggs! Laugh also attracted her. He fought well, and perhaps he had deliberately lost because it was the eve of her blood trial. That would be chivalry!

Laugh must not be married, or he would be with his wife so late in the love months. Yet she thought fondly of Hunt. However, she mustn't think of husbands, or eggs either, until the day after tomorrow.

She lifted off the ground, leading the ceremony that vaunted her Blood Trial. A huge complicated pattern of Skybreaker Gatherers formed in the sky– a dance like courtship, but vaster, slower, more impressive. The dance reached a climax before the first drops of rain began.

Laugh was a beautiful dancer, she thought as she glided down.

But she really wished Hunt were here.

Dance wished Scan would come back. She had had no answer to her letter to him; no surprise, since steering a helium ship was weather-chancy. She had not slept much. The chick woke and called from inside the egg many times during the night, and each time she had jolted awake, sure that a dark shape glided across her sky toward the nest. Yet Silver would spurn the instruments of night-flight, conventions of a weakling civilization. Nor would Dance be able to see through the tent-like roof or the closed shutters.

Dance's last nightmare had sent her bating against the nest walls, and she had broken two primaries. Unpreened, bleary-eyed, she found daylight disorienting.

Wincing with pain from where she had struck against the wall, she stirred. The chick in the egg cried, Mama, and she murmured tired reassuring sounds. She hobbled to the shutter pull and let in daylight. At least the primal horror of the night would evaporate with morning light.

Dance tugged open the east side shutters. But the feeling of disorientation did not ease.

For one thing, the sky and the sky floor were covered with thick ice fog.

After Silver's shower and her light meal of rabbit-meat (she hadn't been hungry, but rain made her want to kill something), she settled on a protected ledge for sleep. Sprays of rain touched her, but she liked to sleep cold. Her keen muscles generated lots of heat.

But the excitement of the day's combat and the Blood Trial Dance dissipated slowly. The other Gatherers chattered and laughed, flitting in the storm as if it were a summer shower, or flew up to the ledges of the temple, which, though sacred, sheltered flirtations and giddy parties.

Silver didn't care. She was the center of attention, among friends and potential lovers. She knew, without looking, that Laugh had roosted where he could watch her. She chuckled softly, and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Fog was a surprise to her, when she awoke, but a sweet surprise. As a child, she had played stalking games by flying a few talons above a plain, so that she might pluck a snake or a mouse like a flower as she passed. It was harder to fly this way in fog, of course, because the ground was cold and offered no thermals. Dance, her enemy, could never have done it, Dance who was brood-sleepy and newly delivered of eggs. So Silver had learned from Gatherer spies. But Silver herself was strong enough to do it, keen from training, fasting, and virginity. She could steal right up to the high ground above the mountainside ledge that held Dance's nest.

The shutters, Dance realized, did not lock. Why should they? Scan and Dance had never anticipated such an attack. With the shutters down, and tied with odd lengths of rope, the nest might be secure. This Silver might tear at the slats with her sharpened talons, but they would hold until Scan returned.

But with the shutters down, Dance could not see her enemy's approach. The fog was, after, all, lifting. Dance gambled on leaving the front shutters up. Silver would have to come from the down-side of the ledge, she thought.

She was wrong.

Even as Dance tied the side shutters down, Silver crouched on high ground, clutching a dead root, only talons above the nest. She had been there since dawn, working and watching the fog lift. Now she stole forward. The

shutters would stand up to strong winds, but she had a plan for getting Dance out of the nest.

She began pelting the shutters with fair-sized stones.

The stones were awkward to throw with her long, natural talons, but her aim was not to break in. She just wanted Dance's attention.

And she wanted her out of the nest, in the air.

Dance appeared at the front of the nest, her eyes wild and unfocussed.

"Golden," said Silver lightly, "come play."

Dance had expected the attack and hated not anticipating its directions. "Go away," she said bravely. "You and I have no quarrel." She cautiously drew on her flying glove and buckled it.

"We have the oldest quarrel of all!" cried Silver. "You are my twin, and we both should not live!"

Dance mustered arguments; they fell away from her. She knew Skybreaker Gatherers had answers for everything. And Silver was retreating, her expression sly wickedness.

"Go away!" Dance cried again. "My husband is returning."

"Then I will fight your husband too. And I hope he's big, for a man."

Dance could see Silver scuttling with her hands at something above the nest. Suddenly she realized that Silver had spent the morning on the slope above the nest setting a trap. That she had laboriously piled rocks and pebbles in a huge pile, held back only by a few twigs, branches, and pebbles. The whole thing could be set off easily. Rockslide!

The nest was an old, picturesque affair. It didn't have a modern foundation. It might hold if the rockslide hit it, but maybe rocks would collapse the flimsy roof and strike the babies in their eggs.

Knowing she'd fallen into a trap, Dance leapt up, half-flying, half-scrabbling, toward Silver. Silver held her ground, then launched delicately into the air. "Come play," she exulted.

Dance fluttered back toward the nest. Silver flapped higher, then dove toward the unsteady pile of rocks. Dance watched in horror as she pulled up short of dislodging them.

"The next time," Silver said, "I push the top rocks. Just a little bit."

"I don't want to fight!" Dance screamed.

"But I do!" Amber fury in Silver's eyes belied the pretense at gaiety.

Dance flew slightly above the rocks. She thought of rolling on her back and grabbing Silver's talons on the next pass. Silver lit slightly below the rocks, above the nest. "Or I could pull this twig." She tugged a branch.

Dance's head spun. She launched out into the air and careened past Silver, trying to rack her across the cere without touching the rockpile or allowing her to start the rockslide.

"More like it!" Silver was delighted. She launched out in chase, and the two sisters closed in hand-to-hand combat, locking talons as they tumbled in the air.

In the nest, inside the elder egg, a nameless child tried to straighten his back. The shell was so tight. It hurt. He wanted to stretch out; the egg bound him. He wanted to breathe; the egg stifled him. He wanted to reach forth his hands; the egg seemed to tighten around him.

"Mama," he called tentatively, kicking, tossing his beak against the stony shell. "Mama. Mama. Mama. MAMA!" There was no response. He had heard his mother's heartbeat and felt her warmth; she had murmured things to him in words he tried to understand. Where was she? He was getting cold, too.

He dashed his beak against the hard shell. It scraped. He tensed his small neck and back and PUSHED. Nothing. Only the pain of being too tightly bound. "Mama. Mama. MAMA!" So close, so tight, so airless. He rhythmically beat his beak against the chalky wall, again, again, again, again. Nothing. He subsided and began to drowse. The feeling of being cramped roused him again. Something on the top of his beak felt really good when he ground it against the shell.

Outside the nest, Dance was fighting in panic. Every time she disengaged, Silver dove toward the rockpile. Dance knew her own weakness, but worse still, she had no killer instinct. Yet there seemed no way out but to kill.

Silver had noticed Dance's concern about the roof of the nest. She lit on it and began to tear with her sharpened talons at the fabric, leaves, and wooden struts. Every time Dance flew at her, she crouched low on the roof, daring Dance to strike and dislodge parts of the roof. Already it bowed in, ready to collapse. Dance was exhausting herself and could not harry Silver away from the fragile structure.

Why, oh why, had they not built a sturdier roof? Its only purpose was to keep rain off. Nothing in its right mind ever attacked a nest. The sentients of Aeyrrhi were masters of their world. Nothing dared approach their nests.

Nothing except their own twins.

Silver crowed as she tore out talons full of fabric and leaves. Some of the struts that held these up were already broken. With a cry of macabre delight, Silver fell through the structure. She emerged a moment later.

". . . MAMA! MAMA!" screamed the chick in a steady, hysterical rhythm. Movement. Fear of falling.

Silver had the egg. Dance went cold with fear, rage, outrage. Silver flew out over the canyon, the egg clenched in her bare talons. She was crushing the egg, the live chick screaming in fear and pain in her hands. Dance beat desperately almost on top of Silver. Rage gave her power. She rolled under the other, flying belly up, and grabbed at the egg, hoping to snatch it and fly free.

And flinched a second too long, fearing her steel flying-glove blades would pierce the child's flesh. She beat up above Silver again, ready for a second pass. But at that moment, Silver howled in triumph, and dropped the egg.

Even this was not the end, for without hesitation Dance went into a power dive that could surely overtake the egg, though if it did not would dash her to bones and feathers on the canyon floor. But Silver had anticipated her dive and followed her, fastening naked talons on her back. Dance tried to free herself, but it was too late.

What good, she thought with a stab of agony, are these sharp eyes, if they can see THAT, the crushed body of her child? She had never seen the child alive, only heard it. Now, outside the egg, it was dead.

Her brain, sight, blood, talons exploded as she tore loose of Silver and plunged to the sky floor where the child lay dead. Perhaps she meant to dash herself against the rocks. Silver had not thought beyond the murder of the child. She had thought only that it had been the ultimate revenge. After all, one chick should have been killed by its twin, just as should have happened with her and Dance. She thought somehow Dance would see this, collapse of grief, give up, and allow herself to be torn apart. Anyway, the egg theft had been spontaneous, not part of her original plan. Maybe, too, she thought it would goad Dance into an earnest fight. Maybe Silver, being the younger, unconsciously wanted to die.

But Dance was beyond logic, too, and pulled out of her suicidal dive only talons from the canyon floor. Fury had turned to despair. Not soft resigned despair like that of patients she had treated, but white-hot despair that opened her throat in a scream and gave her breast muscles fiery strength to climb

# *KILL DANCE*

back up to that speck, the evil speck in her sky, that was Silver, a speck she planned to pluck out and squeeze to death as she would a presumptuous starling marring her blue sky.

Silver, without plan, banked and hovered, terrified at the very battle she had sought. Too late, she made to dive left and evade Dance's rushing wings. But Dance coursed above her. Silver tried to twist still higher, but Dance, talons and glove blades fully extended, had begun her dive. Silver rolled to the left and dodged the razor-sharp weapons. She thought surely Dance would carry through her dive and be so far below that she could climb higher and thus turn to attack.

But now, Dance's despair and Dance's steel-bladed glove, symbol to Silver of decadence and over-civilization, were the very instruments of Silver's undoing.

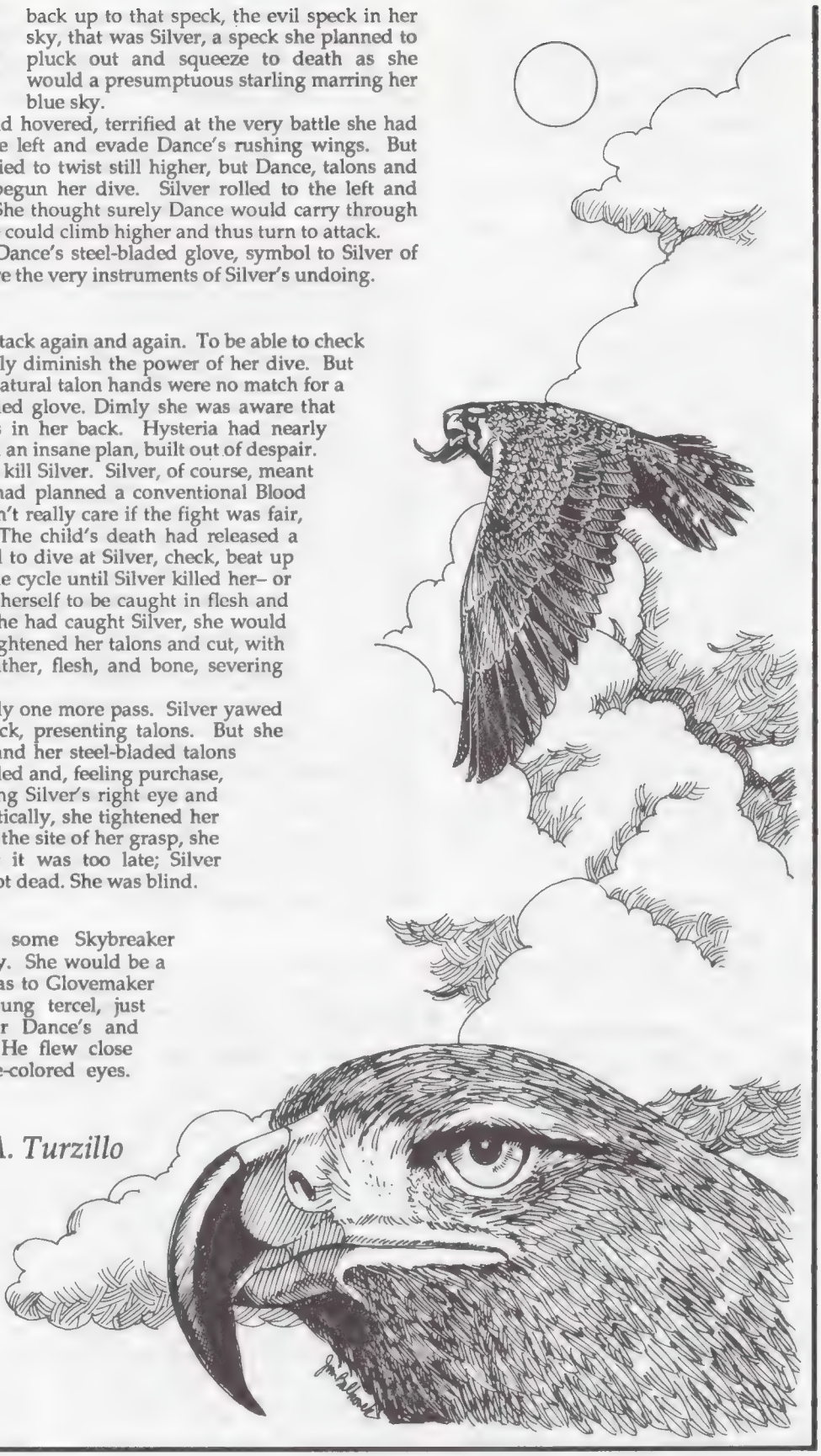
*D*ance knew that she would attack again and again. To be able to check her dive just under Silver did slightly diminish the power of her dive. But she knew by now that Silver's two natural talon hands were no match for a natural talon hand and a steel-bladed glove. Dimly she was aware that Silver had made puncture wounds in her back. Hysteria had nearly closed off the blood vessels. She had an insane plan, built out of despair.

She knew that she was going to kill Silver. Silver, of course, meant also to kill her. But where Silver had planned a conventional Blood Trial, with one survivor, Dance didn't really care if the fight was fair, or if in fact she herself survived. The child's death had released a juggernaut within her. She planned to dive at Silver, check, beat up to diving height again and repeat the cycle until Silver killed her– or until Silver misjudged and allowed herself to be caught in flesh and steel. And Dance knew that once she had caught Silver, she would never, never let go. Until she had tightened her talons and cut, with her steel-bladed glove, through feather, flesh, and bone, severing Silver's spine.

It turned out, Dance needed only one more pass. Silver yawed back and started to roll on her back, presenting talons. But she misjudged. Dance too misjudged, and her steel-bladed talons raked Silver's face. Dance barrel rolled and, feeling purchase, tightened her glove hand, puncturing Silver's right eye and squarely slicing the other. Automatically, she tightened her taloned fist; then realizing in horror the site of her grasp, she released and fluttered away. But it was too late; Silver flapped in aimless panic. She was not dead. She was blind.

*L*ater, after Scan returned, some Skybreaker Gatherers came to carry Silver away. She would be a virgin Mentor to them, as Praise was to Glovemaker Gatherers. In the evening, a young tercel, just coming into adulthood, flew over Dance's and Scan's sky floor. It was Hunt. He flew close enough for them to see his flame-colored eyes. They were sad.

❧ *Mary A. Turzillo*



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# The Old Troll Comes to Town

*by Bob Liddil*

A teamster took a short cut. That's how it all started. The beer truck, heavily laden as it was, should never have been on that lane meant for hay wagons and little lads with fishing poles. But go it did, right down Crooked Creek Lane, across the old stone bridge at more than forty miles an hour, banging and bouncing and crashing loud enough to wake the dead– or at the least, the very soundly sleeping. Nor did it slow down or stop or go back to offer an apology. It just roared away, off toward Barnsley, like a dervish, spitting, popping, and gnashing gears, but not before the ruts in the lane and the stones in the bridge had exacted their price. A single keg of lager broke loose from its straps, rolled though a dislodged back door, bounced once, off the stones in the center of the bridge, sailing over the railing. Then it landed squarely on a rock, with a splash, at the very edge of Crooked Creek, knocking a substantial hole right in its middle and creating a small, but noticeable, environmental impact.

The old troll awoke with a start. Perhaps the shaking of the bridge, his home for more than 100 years, was what did it. From his resting place, underneath, it had seemed about to crash down on top of him. Or perhaps it was just time for his nap to be over, for he was overcome with a powerful thirst, brought about by a delightful odor of well brewed lager.

So he stretched himself one powerful stretch, a one hundred year stretch, (for surely it had been that long that he'd been asnooze), retrieved his walking stick, came out from under his bridge and set off on a stroll down Crooked Creek Lane towards Barnsley (not coincidentally the same direction as had taken the hurried teamster).

Now it so happened that Crooked Creek Lane ended at the Barnsley Road no more than five hundred feet from the White Horse Public House, an honorable place for wetting one's whistle, a place which, excepting a number of coatings of white paint and the addition of electricity some fifty years ago, had not changed very much since the old troll had laid him down to sleep. And at the time of the morning when he awakened, all the cars and trucks which normally traveled the Barnsley Road had already done so, meaning that it was quite empty as he strolled alongside it, gaining ground on the pint he meant to have.

But there were a small number of the beasties parked in the parking lot of the White Horse, (which the proprietor hadn't got around to paving yet), and they struck the old troll as curious wagons with no horses attached, not unreminiscent of those cursed shrieking train-things which had forced him to move to Crooked Creek some years before he'd fallen asleep.

Now it happened that inside the White Horse, having a very early morning pint, was a certain Mr. Heywood, a Yorkshireman of imagination, Mr. Wock, a pudgy, besuited displaced Londoner with a head for figures and a taste for gin, and an American, a huge man, 25 stone or more, in the company of the aforementioned two, and a teamster in a hurry, delivering kegs of lager to a barman who was not altogether quite awake yet.

So it was a business meeting of a sort then, which came to very much of a halt when the old troll strolled into the main room of the pub, walking stick tapping on the wooden floor, with himself looking rather older than the hundred years he'd been sleeping. And the barman gave a double-take, seeing the gnarled face, uncombed knee length white hair, and stooped posture. Being a youngster, quite unused to old trolls strolling about, he mistook the odd looking fellow for a bum.

"I'd like a pint," said the old troll matter-of-factly.

Well, the barman wasn't exactly being rude. Being city-bred, he just didn't know any better and asked to see the color of some cash.

One hundred years of sleeping under the Crooked Creek bridge had done nothing at all for the old troll's disposition, nor had it left him anything like well rested. It was quite obvious that this lad was unacquainted with the custom of granting a pint upon the request of any troll who strolled up to the bar. It was a matter of tradition, and patience has never been a legendary trollish virtue.

The Yank, being a guest in Yorkshire, did not offer comment. The old troll, to him, was just another colorful facet of an already satisfactory holiday. Local color of this magnitude was far more than a tourist could hope for. Mr. Wock, absorbed in his gin, and going at it far earlier than was normal (in face of business pressures having to do with the American), saw the old troll as a variation on other hallucinations associated with his favorite spirits. He, also, offered no comment (stemming from long experience that hallucinations are best observed passively, to avoid calling undue attention to one's self).

"I'll have a pint of lager," reiterated the old troll, who believed he was making himself quite clear. But again, the barman asked to see his money.

It was plain to see, from Mr. Heywood's point of view, that the old duffer was getting quite agitated. In and out, between all this, the teamster moved kegs, dropping them with a thump each time he came in, and then fetching away an empty in its place. Every time a keg hit the wooden floor, the room shook and the old troll jumped. This Yorkshireman was a compassionate fellow, who understood how uncomfortable it might be to be dry and penniless, both at the same time. So he rose from his table, strode over to the bar and offered to buy a round for the house, a grand gesture for a workingman such as he was. His pence were hard earned.

The old troll did not offer a thank you for the pint, though he did raise his glass at the toast of cheers from his benefactor, now resettled at his table. Old trolls, I've been given to understand, expect to be treated respectfully (or at least, far more so than was shown by the barman) as a matter of course.

For the next thirty minutes, each time the Yorkshireman bought a pint for himself, a pint for the Yank and a gin for a progressively more tipsy Mr. Wock, he included the old troll in his buying and it did, in fact, take thirty minutes of steady pints a coming for that worthy to slake his hundred year thirst. During this period, the former two discussed business of a nature and interest to them

both, having to do with the importation of computer games into Yorkshire from America, for distribution to the UK. Certainly this was gibberish to the old troll, who knew nought of computers or even of the UK for that matter.

What he did know was what trolls know, which is a bit of thirst and a bit of magic and the location of the bridge under which they live. It was only after the sixth pint that the old troll realized, soon, he'd have to depart the White Horse, the reason being that far too many travelers would be crossing the Crooked Creek bridge without paying any toll. This was a chilling thought, one that would certainly make one pause to assess the direction of one's morning. So, upon the draining of that last bit of lager, he turned away from the bar and strolled over to Mr. Heywood's table, bringing that conversation once more a total standstill.

"You shall," pronounced the old troll, "be highly successful at whatever it is that you are trying to do with this fellow." He raised his walking stick and waved it over the heads of the Yank and the Yorkshireman, completely missing, by intent or accident, Mr. Wock, who was now seeing two old trolls.

The American prudently smiled, but said nought to whom he perceived to be just a quaint old sot, of what sort, he knew not, but harmless. The Yorkshireman, both prudent and wise for a young man of forty, said, "Thank you very much," and raised his glass in a silent toast, then drained it.

This bit of business taken care of, the old troll turned to the barman, whom he considered cheeky for a barman, and said, "This place could use a bit more greenery, I think," (which was true, by the way) and waved that walking stick in all four directions of the compass.

The barman did not blanch or seem to worry about the old troll's comment, nor was there any bid of, "Come again," as there might have been to a paying customer. Indeed, that barman was cheeky!

The old troll departed the White Horse Public House briskly, the matter of not having collected toll from whomever had awakened him earlier, still weighted upon him. Having noticed that the markings on the kegs which the teamster had been stacking were the same as the broken one currently leaking good lager into Crooked Creek, he drew a conclusion and waved his walking stick at the truck, which was not yet fully loaded with empties. Then, he strolled back up the Barnsley Road to Crooked Creek Lane, and up the lane to his bridge, by now quite happily anticipating collecting a bit of toll, all other business having been concluded.

Inside the White Horse, the conversation between the Yank and the Yorkshireman concludued with a handshake and a feeling between them that their business could be conducted on the basis of their new friendship. The interior of the building, which was of an exposed beam type of construction, had been steadily becoming greener, by virtue of an as yet unnoticed budding of branches and leaves emerging from wood long since past such new life. And in the parking lot, a certain teamster scratched his head in disbelief upon discovery of four flat tires on his truck, vowing that he would never again take Crooked Creek Lane as a shortcut if it resulted in such a job as faced him now.

Giving further consideration, he simply went back inside and ordered a lager for himself. It was Mr. Wock who finally noticed the budding beams and rapidly growing twigs on every piece of wood in the place. But he figured it prudent to keep still and chalked it up to the gin.

The old troll settled down under the Crooked Creek bridge and waited for someone to come along from whom he could collect toll. The sun reflected off the water. The lager and the exercise made him feel warm and drowsy After a bit, he fell asleep, which, upon afterthought, seems not to be a bad thing, for how many modern Yorkshiremen believe in trolls and magic?

*Bob Liddil*

# *RESULTS from the CAULDRON*

## FALL 1989 Issue

*1st Place*

**Malevendra's Pool**
by Darrell Schweitzer

*2nd Place*

**Nightside**
by Mercedes Lackey

*3rd Place*

**Aventura**
by Jacqueline Lichtenberg

# *The Root of Magic*
## *by Elyse Guttenberg*

In the village of Ariok, high in the hill country, a brother and sister once lived in a baker's shop where they were apprenticed. Grier and Helaine worked hard for the baker, constantly tending the fires that heated the huge brick ovens, and gathering fresh spices to add to the dumplings and pies he sold.

Their lives would have been dreary and harsh had they not promised each other two things. The first, which was in their power, was that no matter what adventures life brought, they would always remain friends. The second, which was more a wish than a promise, and so was the thing they yearned for most in the world, was that they enter the wizard's school in Kailan where magic was taught.

Grier and Helaine had never been further away from their inland home than the crossroads that led away from Ariok town. Still, they knew, as did anyone with half a mind to listen, that the great wizard's school opened its doors only to those who presented the masters with a new spell, one worthy enough to be written in the Book of Kailan. With that in mind, they went about their chores with care and speed, anxious to keep the quarrelsome baker happy and earn themselves what bits and snatches of free time they might.

In the afternoons when the day's baking was at last behind them, the ovens cleaned, and new kindling stacked, they quietly left the shop. In the woodland behind the town Helaine gathered wild herbs to study and use. She picked only the rarest, most powerful shoots: rowen and ragwort, cowslip and bright foxglove. Nearby, Grier spent his time at conjuring. He learned to pluck a windfall apple, spoilt and left upon the ground, toss it to the wind, until, at his word, it came down, ripe and red again, and sweet as a summer's day.

At every porch and garden hedge they pestered the village elders with questions, begging for a true word here, a hint of magic there. They traded loaves of bread for wizard's lore, and once, for the price of a cake, they bought the secret of summoning an owl to them out of the clear sky. But for all their trying, they knew these were simple spells and nothing they had learned would allow them entry to Kailan.

Then, one morning, as Grier was measuring out the flour for the morning's baking, he heard a peddler's voice crying her wares.

"Pots and knives," came the voice, "Sharpen your knives. Pots and wares. Trade your wares."

Grier turned at the sound, but Helaine was already busy with her work. Sifters and spoons and bowls of all sizes were laid out on the counter, waiting. "Can you carry in more wood for the box?" she asked.

Grier nodded then stepped outside to the woodshed. Log by log, he gathered up a neat armload of wood, but the peddler's voice called again, so clear he could not turn aside. Peddlers brought stories and treasures. With luck, perhaps this one would teach them the words of a spell. He needed only a minute, he thought, to ask the peddler if she had any to share, then back to the shop again and the baker would be none the wiser.

Down the village lane and past the shops and houses he ran, but the voice had travelled further than he realized. It wasn't till he was out on the open road that he saw, not one of the sturdy peddler folk known around the hill towns, but an old, stoop backed woman dressed in a coat of patchwork rags.

Grier stopped short to watch. At first, she seemed more a bird than a woman, her coat flapping in the thin breeze as if it were made of feathers. And her white hair was a work of a thousand tiny braids, woven and twirled into a nest. Then, indeed from out of the mat of hair, flew first one, then another tiny bird, white and fine as themoving clouds. They flittered skyward, then, turning about, disappeared again into the great mound of hair.

The woman hadn't seen him. She stood with one leg perched atop a careless mound of logs, and kept herself busy with her campfire, poking at the burning wood, and complaining all the while.

Nearby stood a rough-hewn cart laden full with knives and kettles, just as she'd promised. But tucked carefully in a corner behind the kitchen wares, Grier could not help but see the stack of wooden cages with crawling snakes, and a row of small jars filled with dark, moving liquids.

Grier tried to back away before she saw him. It was a mistake, he decided. This old woman didn't seem the kind of person who would want to talk to him. But, as luck would have it, his foot hit against a rock, and, hearing the sound, the peddler turned toward her guest.

The birds nesting in her hair squawked. "Well, boy, what is it you're looking for?" she asked, and there was no kindness in her voice. "For if you've not come for something to buy, you've no need of taking my time."

"Excuse me, ma'am," Grier said, "I'd trade with you, if you've a mind."

"Oh?" the old woman straightened the bulging pockets on her coat. "And

what would that be? A knife, perhaps, for such a tall lad as you? A pen that holds its own ink?"

Grier glanced again toward the wagon, saw the quick darting of a snake's tongue. She might be a peddler, he thought, or she might be a witch, but either way he wasn't willing to return empty handed. Grier gathered up his courage. "It's a spell I'd trade for, ma'am. Anything you might be willing to teach."

"Is that right?" The old woman's laugh was sharp as a crow's, but she nodded to herself and seemed to consider the idea. Then, rummaging about in her pockets she pulled out a fistful of wild millet. She scattered the seeds to the woodpile as birds, by twos and threes, flew noisily from her hair. "Well, my friends," she said to the birds. "Shall we part with what's left of this troublesome tree? It's brought us no luck, for all the work we spent trying to get it. And none will it bring him either." She turned to Grier. "You see that fire, boy? Take one of the logs home for yourself. And see if anything happens."

Grier bent low to the burning wood. "Is it magic?"

"It should have been. But if it was, it did me no good. I'll trade you for it. A meal. A loaf of fresh bread. And now that I think of it, I'd just as soon be rid of the wood, and have done with the whole affair."

"What should I do with it?" Grier asked.

"Do? Why, do what you will," she said. "Or what you can!" And with that, she turned her back on Grier and hobbled toward her wagon.

Grier picked through the glowing fire and chose a narrow branch from the edge, a smoldering piece which had not burnt through more than its tip. Then, calling out a promise to return at day's end, he raced back toward the baker's shop.

Inside the kitchen, all was as Grier had left it. Helaine clapped the flour from her hands. "All right then. What did you get?" she asked.

"This," Grier said, and he showed her the smoldering log.

"What does it do?"

"I don't know. The peddler was such a strange woman. And tell you the truth, I'm not sure I should trust it." Then, on a whim, Grier opened the firebox door and pushed the narrow log inside.

At first nothing happened. Grier blew lightly on the coals 'til the embers brightened, then sat back to watch. Soon, the fire was red and glowing. Flames rose and danced and leapt from branch to branch. But the next moment a spark flew, bright with its own warm life. Out of the fire it jumped and onto Grier's hand, surprising him. The spark held fast and Helaine cried out a warning. Quickly, Grier snapped his hand shut. The two children looked at each other but said not a word.

Grier opened his hand. The spark was there still, but larger, a flame, glowing and reaching. And though Grier could see it, he felt no pain. Cautiously, Helaine stretched out her hand, then drew back. The fire was real. She could feel it. No matter what Grier tried, each time it was the same. As long as his hand was open the fire burned brightly. Close it and it was gone.

They talked for a while, and in the end decided there was nothing for it but that they set off together to find the peddler.

She was there still, out on the road where Grier had left her, busily tossing a set of tin dishes from her wagon to a sack. Helaine noted carefully the rainbow of patch pockets that made up her coat, and the birds singing in her hair as if they were a crown of music. But when she saw the wagon filled with its dark, moving shapes, Helaine backed away.

"Excuse me," Grier said. "I don't mean to interrupt. But, you see... I didn't know where else to come."

Annoyed, the old woman let her sack down. "Well, what do you want now?" she snapped. "I don't see as you've brought my breakfast."

"No, ma'am. I'm sorry. I forgot. It's this wood you gave me." Then slowly, he stretched out his fingers and showed her the flame, brighter even than before.

The peddler let out a shout of surprise, and lifted her hands to ward off a blow. But no blow came. She waited, took a step closer. "I should have seen it in your face," she said to Grier. "Like calls to like. I've said so myself. No forest magic would have done that, no matter how you called, without it found some of the power in you."

Grier looked across at Helaine, then down at his shoes, at his pants, still dusted in flour. "Would that it were so," he whispered.

"It is so," she said. "More than anything, magic is a way of seeing. It takes a certain kind of person– someone like me– able to look into the heart of a thing and understand what it is lies there at the root. "Tell me now, what were you doing when you built that fire," the peddler made her voice as soft as possible. "Remember. It's important."

"I suppose, I went back to the shop. I took up the ax, the small one, and found a dry stick to cut down..."

"No. No," she interrupted, "Not what your hands were doing. What you were doing."

"Well then, I was looking at the fire," Grier said, "Thinking how beautiful it was, the colors, red, blue, and gold, all dancing one over the other. And I wondered what it would feel like to be that wood, to be burning, and changing." Grier looked up, met the old woman's eyes. "And then the flame jumped to my hand."

"You called it when I could not," she said. "But now it's for my birds and me to conjure the wood. We've waited a long time for this, you see. For a tree to work our magic in. Now, sit beside me, here on the ground, boy. And hold out your hand. Say not a word. And don't be afraid. The wood doesn't mean to hurt you, or it could have by now."

The old woman pushed her hair away from her dark eyes, letting loose a storm of twigs and acorns. Then she began a song, wordless, but with trills and humming and a sound like bird's wings cutting through a sharp wind.

In the silence that followed, the flame in Grier's hand came alive and began to change. As they watched, a Dryad stepped forward, one of the wood spirits whose own life is tied to the life of their tree. The Dryad was thin, but hard as a branch of birch, and strong, as though she could have snapped Grier in two. The long brown hair that flowed from her head was not silken like a human's, but knotted the way a hundred leaves might be, twining through the branches of a tree. And on her face was a look of such sadness that Grier could not move for fear of hurting her.

The moment her shape was settled, the Dryad began to grow and change again. First her arms lengthened into branches, then her legs thickened into a trunk that grew and grew like a whirlwind in the forest. Helaine saw what was happening and cried out, but it was too late. The Dryad had turned back into a tree and caught Grier up inside its center, so deep within the prison of her branches that he could not see, nor hear, nor feel the earth's wind on his face.

Helaine leapt forward to catch him, but the old woman grabbed at her shirt, holding her back, doing nothing until it was too late.

"Grier! Grier!" Helaine called, but if he answered, she had no way of knowing. She pulled free of the old woman. "You tricked us. You knew it would happen."

"Tricked you? Nonsense!" the old

woman rubbed her hands together. "But you needn't worry. We can still make her give him back."

"It's her tree she wants back. Somebody... Mind you," she said, "I don't know who, but somebody has trafficked where they should not, and cut the roots out of the living tree. She'll die without them. But if we're careful, there's power here for the taking. I wouldn't take it myself, of course."

"No, of course." Helaine looked past the peddler to the pile of splintered firewood.

"What we have to do now," the old woman said, "is piece the wood back together again, and hope we can bring her out. It's when she steps out for the roots she's lost that we can catch her. Quickly now, you run back for the kindling your brother used. If there's so much as a splinter left behind, she won't speak."

Quickly, Helaine ran down the road and back to the baker's shop where the customers were filing in at the counter. She snuck round the back way, mindful of the baker's dogs, and on into the kitchen. Quickly, she pulled what was left of the Dryad's wood out of the firebox and wrapped it tightly in a canvas so it would not burn. Then she swept the floor and panned through the dust whorls, careful in case any of the precious wood had fallen to the ground. Just as she was about to leave, she remembered the ashbox, and, taking up a coal shovel, she emptied the ashes into a pouch, and tied it round her waist.

Back at the camp, the peddler grabbed the wood from Helaine's hand. "Give it to me while the power's close by," she said. Then she sat herself down and began assembling bits of her own logs with the few splinters Helaine had brought, until, stick by stick, the outline of a tiny tree took shape on the ground.

While she worked, Helaine watched the Dryad's tree. When she stood on tiptoe, and looked one way first, then the other, it was just possible to make out her brother's face. But even as she found him, it seemed as if the branches were moving, knotting him deeper and deeper into its heart. And though she thought she heard him calling, it could have been simply the wind in the treetop, so close had the boy and the Dryad grown, one to the other.

Meanwhile, the old woman's magic didn't seem to be working. First she leaned the sticks up one atop the other this way, and then that way. But try as she might, she could not make it look like anything but a marionette, stiff and useless, and not a great, living tree at all. "It's not right," she fussed, then, noticing Helaine she said, "Here, you try. Fit them in. Mayhap some of your brother's magic rubbed off on you as well."

Helaine bent to her task, but somehow, she had no heart for the work. She worked slowly, and in a little while she was able to find places for the sticks to lean against each other, a knothole here, a hollow between two forked branches. A slight breeze shook the toy tree, and almost she dared hope it might come alive. But no. Nothing happened.

One long hour they stood there, waiting.

Away in the village, the town hall clock began its toll. One. Two. Three. It rang out slowly. Helaine sighed. The baker would be in a fury by now, his customers disgruntled with no morning cakes to start their day. Still, the old woman went on mumbling and rearranging the sticks.

Helaine's heart grew heavy. Each time she looked at the tree, she was sure that Grier's arms were growing more wrinkled and hard, and that his hair looked less brown and more the color of green shoots unfurling. But then, something happened. Grier's arms, covered in a shirt of bark though they were, began to move. Slowly, slowly, as though it were the wind moving the branches, he beckoned to her.

Without daring to speak, Helaine drew closer. Grier moved again, and this time, she was certain. They were trying to tell her something, her brother and the Dryad. Slowly, they pointed toward the wood pile, then the old woman, then an axe that leaned against her wagon wheel. She could see Grier's face intent, his eyes burning. The ash, he pointed, as if acting out the story, the ash held the secret of the tree's roots. The Dryad had spoken with him, made him understand. She did not mean to hurt him. It was the ash the Dryad needed if ever she was to live again.

Just then, the old woman pushed herself up from the ground. "This'll never work," she said. "It's far too slow." And rummaging through her many pockets, she pulled out a sharpening stone. "Here now! That's what we need. The ax will do a quicker job. You stay here."

Heart pounding, Helaine nodded. The peddler woman walked stiffly away, but by chance she turned around again just as Helaine reached for her pouch. "What have you got there?" she asked, her voice tight with warning.

"Nothing," Helaine said quickly. "Only a piece of bread from the bake shop. I was hungry. That's all."

The peddler stood there, uncertain whether to trust the girl. All about her, the birds chattering grew shriller and more quarrelsome, as if they too were anxious to have the Dryad's tree for themselves. "Now child. I'll make you a promise," the old woman whined. "Your brother came to me seeking magic, which he found, and more than he bargained for. But you're not like him, are you? You'd know what to do with a proper spell. Listen, do you see this bird?" she asked and, raising her hand overhead, a bird sprang suddenly from the tangle of her hair. It was the most beautiful of all the peddler's birds, small, but bright as a summer meadow and with feathers so long and delicate, Helaine could not help but start forward.

"Not yet," the peddler laughed, but she held the bird closer, allowing Helaine to stroke its feathers. "First you must make a bargain."

"What's that?"

"That you'll leave the Dryad to me. Do nothing, and the bird is yours."

Entranced by the lovely bird, Helaine could only nod. Then, as the old woman returned to her wagon, the bird hopped to Helaine's shoulder and began to sing. It was a cheerful song, quick and dancing. When it was done, the bird began a second song, a game this time. Lightly, the bird jumped to the ground, then to a log, then a rock, leading Helaine with its music, laughing and jumping in circles. Up high it swooped, playing with her hair, catching the ribbon of her apron, teasing her. But suddenly, the bird landed on a branch of the Dryad's tree and with that, Helaine realized her mistake.

The peddler had meant for the bird to trick her, to make her forget her brother, and almost, it had worked. Quickly, Helaine opened the pouch at her side and flung a handful of ashes wide over the tree's outstretched branches.

She could still see her brother between the twigs and leaves of his prison. But now, strengthened by its own ashes, the Dryad opened a secret part of its trunk. Just as suddenly, Grier appeared, as though in a doorway. He shook his head clear, saw Helaine as still as a blade of grass on a windless knoll, saw the witch behind her, ax in her hand, saw the broken logs, and in the firepit, the scattering of white coals that had been the heart of the Dryad.

Now Helaine threw the remaining ashes skyward, and the tree opened her branches again, welcoming them home.

At last the Dryad stepped free, tall and beautiful in her dress of newly blossomed leaves. She opened her branching fingers and gathered in the falling ashes. When the Dryad turned to thank Helaine, her voice was like a summer song.

"Yesss! Yesss! Yesss!" she sang. "I have my branches, but my Roots Roots Roots are yet Frail Frail Frail."

But the bird's work was not done. Away from the tree it sped, higher and higher, crying out a warning. The peddler spun around, her face white with anger. Furiously, she screamed at Helaine. "What have you done?" and she took up her ax that she had sharpened and raced with it, blade forward, toward the tree.

The Dryad faced the old woman. "Youuu Youuu Youuu have Cuttt Cuttt Cuttt the root of my Life Life Life," she said.

The old woman made no attempt to answer. She dropped the ax to the ground and shook herself free of Grier's hold. Then she straightened her back till she seemed nearly as tall as the Dryad and began a spell of summoning, the strongest words she knew. "Arianrock. Corarock. Let the Winds of Nine pass through. Let them live. Let them storm."

But nothing happened. "Arianrock. Corarock. Helioc. Trope," she sang again, her voice deep and full. And this time, the birds that had gathered in the nest of her hair arose at her command, gathered, and stormed toward the tree.

Wings battering the air, beaks wide in protest, a rage of noise, they came. Still, the Dryad stood calm and straight, waiting. Then, just as they were almost upon her, the Dryad sang out a single piercing note and their flight changed, slowed, and turned to a glide. Gently, as though they had come home, one by one, they landed in the branches of the Dryad's tree and forgot their fighting.

Furious, the old woman threw herself at the tree. The ash! That was where the magic lay. It had been in her hands and she'd let it slip away! She grabbed for her ax, but Grier kicked it beyond her reach. He and Helaine lunged past her, scooped up handful after handful of the remaining coals and threw them over the tree. The Dryad stepped backward, into her tree again and with each trace of ash, she began to turn a brighter green. Leaves budded. Bark thickened and joined and ran around her arms and legs, strengthening her. Branches sprouted and split, shooting higher and higher over her head.

And before the witch could try anything else, a dusting of the ashes fell gently upon her back, on her hair and coat, covering her in a cloud of grey. And in that instant, the old woman could not move.

The Dryad shook her branches slightly and it sounded as though the bells of a field of daffodils had chimed. Nourished by its own roots, the tree began to grow over the old woman, as it had grown over Grier before. Bark and branch pointed skyward. Trunk nestled into the ground. New roots took hold where the old had been severed until, at last, the tree stood, strong and alive again there in the middle of the road to Kailan.

Grier and Helaine took hold of each other's hand. Then, as they stood there watching, two narrow, straight branches fell to the ground. "Walking sticks," Helaine cried out in wonder.

"A gift from the Dryad, " Grier finished. "A fire spell worthy enough for the wizards of Kailan."

❧ *Elyse Guttenberg*


*SPECIAL for you HORROR WRITERS (and READERS)*

# –HALLOWE'EN–

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# The Night-Bound

*by Cynthia Drolet*

On another night, perhaps, I would not have stopped. But this was Second Night and the healing flowed strong in me. Strong enough to take me from the shadows of the oak-lined road toward the pain that touched me across the night.

When I found the source, I saw it was a wolf.

Bright moonlight sparkled off the white fur at her back like sunlight off of virgin snow. But her paws and muzzle and the fur that fringed her belly were matted thick with blood and filth.

She trembled, her eyes closed, the bottom of her jaw lying in the dirt. Her near hind leg was stretched behind her, the paw clamped firmly in a hider's trap.

So silent. I could hear only the thin rasp of her breathing.

But I could feel her pain, throbbing through my gut and thrilling through my head. I could feel the power, both gift and curse, coursing up to meet that pain, to challenge it, to conquer it.

Yet I hesitated.

Stelring Village was still leagues away and the flames that blazed down Namrose Mountain would not be slowing. I was needed there. My aunt, my cousins, a hundred others and more were even now fighting an inferno that threatened homes and crops and lives.

To work my way close enough to free the wolf bitch and then to heal her would take time I could ill afford to spare. The choice, painful, was clear.

I turned to go.

Could not.

Spelled by my own conscience and by the ache of power flowing within me, I edged closer toward the wolf.

The trap was of black iron—neither white fire nor charm could touch it. Whatever the bait had been, it had long since disappeared. I moved closer to her, expecting panic and a show of jaws. But she was a proud beast and she neither flinched nor bared her teeth.

It took only a moment to figure out the workings of the trap, but the moon crawled steadily across the night as I tried in vain to spring it. A special tool was needed to remove the locking pin and I had only my hands, a rock, and a short stout branch to work with.

The wolf bitch bore the added pain of my fumblings in stillness and in silence.

At last the lockpin gave and the spring fell slack. As gently as I could, I pried the rude teeth of the trap away from the mangled paw. Only then did the wolf make a sound -- a low cry of pain. Pain that echoed in my soul.

I did not have to search for my power nor tempt it to me, for this was Second Night, when the orange bloat of the moon was at its full. The healing bubbled within me, washed over me, and spilled out into the creature beneath my hands. Her eyes rolled back wildly at the first touch of magic, then the healing seeped into her and she relaxed.

Slowly but thoroughly the healing began, knitting the tiny bones of the foot whole, mending torn ligaments and broken blood vessels, and sealing smooth the ragged edges of opened skin.

If I were to choose the most sweetly savored moments of life, they would be those when the body first recognizes the absence of pain. With tiny, tentative movements the wolf gained her feet. Her near hind leg was stiff still, but when she ventured it, it bore her weight without complaint.

There was a crease between her eyes that deepened when she swung her gaze on me.

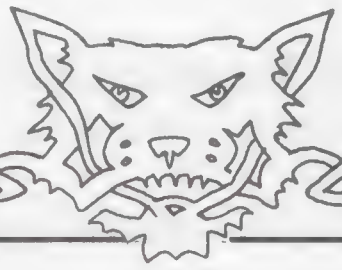
"Go, little one," I told her. "And be wary now of traps."

For a moment she looked at me, then slipped softly away into the trees.

Tired —for healing is weary work—I trudged my way back to the shadowed road.

Though the sun had not yet topped the Tyran Ridge, day had already broken when I reached Stelring Village.

Broda, my aunt, was waiting for me near the cattle pond where I had once skated as a child. She caught me in a frantic hug.



ARMAND CABRERA

"It's nearly Third Night. I thought you wouldn't come!"

"Your message only reached me four nights ago. The road between Myrnath and Stelring is a slow one. But I'm here now. Tell me what's going on."

She motioned and together we climbed the rise north of the pond. From its knoll I could see the south slope of Namrose Mountain, and the haze of grey I only fancied seeing low in the sky became a cloud the color of cinder ash that engulfed the mountain from peak to foot—or nearly so. Through the smoke I could see flashes of orange.

The wind from the north carried with it a strong whiff of pungent smoke as it drove the flames before it.

"Less than two days," Broda said. "If the winds keep on like this, there'll be nothing left of Stelring. Our lives are planted in this ground."

"What's being done?"

"We're cutting a firebreak. There, where the mountain meets the valley. But the work is slow and the flames swift. The firebreak may help but it won't be enough. Not with the few workers we have. The fire will simply find a way around it and still come into the valley."

"We've sent pleas for help to nearby towns, but most are having troubles of their own with drought or summer fever. What little we can manage to do will not be enough. I'm sure of it. When I called for you four days ago and the flames were only just begun, I hoped we wouldn't need your talents. Now, though ..."

She paused, as if reluctant to say something difficult. Dropping her gaze, she would not look at me.

"There is another thing you should know. Most of those who have come are Hadranic zealots and they have little care, I think, whether good people lose their land or lives. They simply gather at disasters like vultures at a pig slaughter. They hope only for the hunt. If it were Dark Night, most of them wouldn't even be here."

I nodded. The phenomenon had not escaped me. Usually I could avoid places where zealots would be most active in their hunts. But Broda had once risked the safety of herself and her children in my defense. I was plighted to help her now.

"I have till sunrise next," I told her. "There should be something I can do to aid you."

There was an uneasy silence between us then. After all, we had not seen each other for nearly two years. Not since my mother, Broda's older sister by twelve years, had died.

"Ranuck and Corel, they are well?" I asked.

She nodded quickly. "They wanted to help at the firebreak, but they're babies still. Mari has them now. I wish you could see them. Strong little boys. They'll be fine men."

"With you to guide them, I have no doubt they'll be an honor to your name."

I think Broda mistook my wistful smile, for she appeared embarrassed by the word 'honor.' In truth, though, I was not thinking of the dishonor I had brought into the family, but wondering what it would be like to bear a child such as feisty Ranuck or stolid little Corel. I, of course, like all my kind, will remain forever barren. At the whim of the moon, white fire and healing flow instead of women's courses.

Longing tempered with resignation —I wonder if this is the way men feel, too, when they look on children.

With great solicitude I took Broda's hand.

Only then did she look back up at me as she kissed my forehead. "Be careful."

The kiss, the words—they made me uncomfortable. Concern always has that effect on me.

I pulled away from her. "Of course."

She nodded, "I told them I came down for more food and water. They're probably thinking now that I've slept as well. If I don't get back to the firebreak soon, Tilden may come looking for me. I'd invite you back to the house, but—"

"I know."

Broda's husband, Tilden, was one of the zealots. It had taken a stoning, with Tilden at the fore of those casting rocks, to convince her of his fervor.

"Will I see you again?" Broda asked.

"Fates willing, but not this trip. I'll send words before I come—wherever you might be."

We parted then, she for her home and I for the mountain. Keeping to the dry thickets, I skirted thinly planted fields of wheat and corn, the stalks standing tall and straight as warriors—proud survivors of this drought-plagued land.

When I reached the mountain's foot a little to the west of the firebreak I saw Broda was right. Maybe a hundred men, women, and even little children labored at cutting out a swath of bare land through dead and dying vegetation, great trees were seasoning where they stood.

The amount of land that had been cleared looked impressive taken on its own. But one needed only to turn one's sight upward—to the great blaze that roared down the mountain, eating the land as it went and belching an ocean of smoke in its wake.

The slope was gradual enough so that my climb, was not much hampered. The haze of smoke aided in keeping my progress unseen, though few below would think to look for help above. Soon enough the zealots would know I was here and, as I reasoned it, the nearer I was to the blaze, the more loathe the zealots would be to follow me.

The sun was well beyond its zenith when I finally felt myself comfortably positioned between firebreak and fire. From my pack I took a scarf which I dampened with a bit of water and tied over my nose and mouth. My eyes were watering from the acrid smoke, but at least I could breathe more easily.

I settled in with my back to a half-dead oak, studied for a moment the path of the fire that raged above me, then closed my eyes and waited for the night. I drowsed some, and listened to the rustle of the brittle undergrowth as snakes and mice and other small animals fled their burning homes.

Dusk at last slid over Namrose Mountain. The sky faded to the color of smoke and in time smoke and sky seemed to become one. Then the Night-began to move within me.

It was then I realized I was being watched.

I froze, holding my breath, straining to hear any sound that would give the watcher away. Intuition and nothing more turned my eyes west.

I breathed again.

There, at the farthest reach of vision, through smoke-heavy air and falling night, stood a white wolf.

That she was the same one I had helped, I had no doubt. White is a rare color in a wolf. That I would see two of such a color in as many days was no more possible than this fire would retreat back up the mountain on its own.

The only thing less possible was that a healthy wolf would have chosen to flee toward flame.

But I had little time to ponder the puzzle, for low in the eastern sky the moon had begun to rise.

A red moon.

I trembled. A red moon on Third Night!

Power when I needed it most; omen when I needed it least.

The white wolf threw back her head and howled.

With a trepidation I hadn't known before, I turned inside myself, seeking to tap the wellspring from which my power flowed.

The influence of the red moon was already strong. I had only to touch my place of power for the first white flame to spark before me.

Soon one flame was joined by another, then another and another until a wall of white fire burned around me. White fire—smokeless fire. Fire unmoved by wind or water. My power, my element.

With a gesture I sent the flames north and east. Unmindful of the winds that swept into them, they raced across the mountain—a ribbon of white, a gay banner feeding and growing as they ran.

An unnatural beacon, an unmistakable sign, as recognizable as the blooded moon to all the zealots gathered below.

I could afford no thought to the zealots now. The white flames, of course, would burn till sunrise, but they needed guidance or they would burn in vain.

Already weary, for it is not often that my magic is so taxed, I trudged along my wall of flame, shoring it where it burned thin, reshaping it when mundane sparks broke past.

By the time I reached the eastern edge I had gone four leagues and more and the blooded sun, paling, was halfway down the western sky.

I collapsed on a lot of unburnt wood and looked behind me.

Along the breadth of the mountain, wild fire wrestled white. Flames towered skyward, roaring with the gods' own thunder.

The wildfire fed off every burnable scrap until all along the wall was char. But my fire fed off flame, and the steady push of the wind only forced more of the wildfire into my fire's maw.

Checked at last, the wildfire began to die.

And as the flames settled, I pitched forward in utter exhaustion and white fire gave way to the black waves of unconsciousness.

When I woke, the moon had fallen behind the Tyran Ridge . The white flames were beginning to lose their glory, falling into the ash remains beneath them.

I lay on my side, cheekdown in the loam, a branch or rock prodding me in the ribs. I put an elbow under me to rise, and only then did I notice the bands of iron at my wrists.

Someone laughed -- deep and ugly.

Before I could move, I was wrenched up by my hair and my head was twisted round so that I was staring into the grinning face of Tilden, Broda's zealot husband.

He stared into my eyes.

"Witchmarked. Like the Hadran said they'd be."

I shuddered. The spindled irises of my lavender eyes were the only thing that marked me outwardly, but the spindles were more than enough to condemn me.

"You know what else the Hadran says about witches, don't you?"

Only too well did I know.

"The spawn of floods and fires. Destroyers of decency. Breeders of deceit. The gates through which pious men fall into disrepute."

Catechism. And Tilden had it down perfectly.

He jerked me to my feet.

I searched for any dram of power, but it was Third Night, the moon was setting, and the white fire had drained my reserves. Not till the next cycling of the moon would I be able to call forth my flames again.

"Death to all witches. Death to the handmaidens of the darkling ways."

In the dying firelight I saw the dark blade he held. Iron. He had known what he would find when he set out to discover the one who'd set the white fire.

What appeal is there to a man who lived by doctrines instead of brains?

"I am of your blood," I whispered.

"No blood of mine. Changed in the cradle no doubt. My wife showed me proof of her courses before we wed. She has borne me sons. Her eyes are human. You're no kith of any man."

Oh, Broda, I thought, why did you let yourself be beguiled by a handsome face? That question, though, was perhaps unjust.. To look at Tilden one would not know the hate that lurked behind those fair eyes.

I struggled, but I was bound and Tilden free. The knife swept above me like a stooping hawk. I closed my eyes.

Let it be swift, I pled.

Then something slammed into Tilden, knocking him away.

When I'd caught my breath, I saw the white wolf standing over him. Blood dripped from her jaws and half of Tilden's throat was gone.

Poor Broda.

The wolf's ears tipped forward, catching some distant sound. Nearby, the white flames lay dying, smothered by the grey dawn creeping across the night.

Then I, too, heard men in the distance, searching. Exhausted, not thinking clearly, I stood like a stupid sheep trying to decide which way to run.

"Come!"

The word was half-articulated, half-growled.

My astonishment seemed only to root me more firmly to where I stood. But the wolf—woman? her outlines were vague in the pre-dawn light—took my hand in her mouth and urged me forward.

We fled east, keeping low among the stunted trees, running until I could run no more. The wolf-woman led me to a thicket and cleared a space inside where I could sleep. She must have taken the key to the wrist bands from Tilden before we fled, for the bands fell free.

"Changeling," I whispered, and the slender, naked woman with the pale hair smiled.

"Jita," she said, stretching out her hand.

"Alwyss."

We touched palms in the old way, and then I fell asleep.

When I woke, the moon was up and the wolf-woman sat beside me, her hands filled with hickory nuts and Kabash roots.

"A peace offering?" I asked.

She handed me the food. "More than peace. Friendship. It seems we need each other."

I stuffed a root into my mouth and nodded. "It's been a long time since I've had a friend."

"As I."

"My work often takes me on long journeys across the realm. There's little time I have for friendship."

"Between Third Night and First Night, I, too, flee the Hadranic cult. There may be greater safety for us if we flee as one."

Flee. I had always been reluctant to think that my wanderings were anything more than simple but necessary meanderings that took me from village to village so that I could practice small healings and perform minor miracles on the nights when the moon rose full in the sky. But the wolf-woman—Jita, she had said her name was—was right. I was deluding myself to think that I was really doing anything but fleeing from the zealots who skulked the streets of every village I'd ever been in.

And, too, I was coming to realize, after so many Dark Nights alone in woods and wastes, that I was indeed lonely.

Hesitantly, Jita laid a hand on my shoulder. "Moon-bound and Night-bound we are. One. Together."

She bared her teeth in a smile that spoke of trust and companionship, of loyalty and oath-sworn love.

And it was then, in a thicket in the middle of nowhere, that I, the witch, understood at last that I had found my familiar.

❧*Cynthia Drolet*

# The Fire Rider

## by Mary Frances Zambreno

DIANA L. PAXSON

Col Verrin rode the great blood bay without saddle or bridle like the human half of a centaur, his hands twisting in the thick black mane and the leaning and shifting of his body telling the horse where they wanted to go. They ran together with the night wind at their backs, black-stockinged legs cutting prairie grass at such clean, savage speed that had there been any justice in the world the young man on the tall red horse would have outrun thought itself across the plains.

The prairie knows no justice. Behind them, its sky was alight with flames.

It was the dark of the moon, and stars merged with red sparks sent upward by the fire; the eastern horizon glowed sullenly. The plains people have a story that the sun-god on a racing horse first brought fire to humankind by setting the prairie in flames and racing across it for the sheer joy of the contest— that fire is a double-edged gift, a knife without a hilt to hold it safely by. One sunset, every early spring, the plains people send the best horse and rider across the prairie towards the river and the mountains, and send the fire behind them. If the wind is especially strong, the fire may reach the river before it dies. The horse and rider never do.

The bay snorted at his speed, dismayed as the weight on his back told him to slow.

Gently, wind-brother, his rider's thought calmed him. Gently, now.

His eyes shifted ceaselessly along the ground in front of them, searching for some sign only he knew would be there. Then he leaned forward, and the stallion sprang to speed again with a single leap, every instinct taking them towards water. Col trusted the horse to cover ground safely; he kept his eyes on the trail.

They topped a small rise, and abruptly the boy sat back and pulled his mount to a walk. The stallion fought him, but slowed. The trail was very fresh, here. Col slid to the ground.

Stay, his mind told the horse. The beast snorted disapproval, restless with fear, but stood obediently. The boy ran from him, pushing aside the thick grass. The prairie was still, no noise but his steps.

There was a girl sitting at the base of the small rise, a girl painted for the riding and wearing white leather. She looked up, her eyes as silver as the mane of the dead mare whose head she held in her lap. Her hair was the color of good red earth: Tam Kiel.

"Keil," Col said, suddenly more breathless than speed had made him.

Her eyes widened. "Verrin. What are you doing here?"

"I came to find you," he said. Other girls used his calling name Col; not Tam Kiel. Once he'd hoped—ah, well. Life first, then hope. "How did it happen?"

She touched the knife deep in the mare's throat, its blade red with her own blood and the mare's. "She broke a foreleg. We stepped in a hole that wasn't there before and isn't there now."

# The Fire Rider

"I wondered how it would work," he said. "The priests sent magic through the earth. Aja, their apprentice, told me, because we were boys together, we had our manhood rites together, and he was troubled. The fire rider is supposed to have a chance, as the god did. You had none."

She stared at him, shocked. "The priests sent magic to stop us? Why? I rode the fire for them, as my father promised before he died. We would have died anyway, Asha and I."

"They were afraid," he told her. "You are too light, the mare too fast. They were afraid you would reach the river and then come back."

"No one could outrun the fire," she said slowly. "It's only to try. I'm dead already."

And you too, now, her eyes told him.

"I know," he said. "But they were afraid. Your father was a powerful man who might have fought them once. If you did survive, you might challenge their place and power."

He looked to the sky: it was growing lighter. Fire? No, dawn. Tam Kiel turned to the mare again. Her still-bleeding hand stroked the silver neck. He knelt beside her, put his hand to the knife-blade and pulled. She took the knife from him, slipped it into her boot, and accepted his hand to rise.

"Now what?" she asked.

"We ride, sister-of-my-heart," he told her simply. It was a lover's calling, but she didn't seem to hear. "We ride for the river."

He led her to where the stallion waited, shifting impatiently from foot to foot. When she saw him, she stopped.

"Verrin! That's the kinghorse!"

"I know," he said. "He comes to my mind-call. He always has."

"But the kinghorse leads the herd!"

"So the herd will find a new leader. It has before."

He knelt, cupped his hands. She hesitated: women rode mares, men rode stallions. Then she twined her bloody hand into the long black mane, stepped into his clasp, and mounted. Drying blood crackled and flaked from her fingers—she held her free hand down to him, and he took it, pulled himself up behind her. The horse stirred anxiously beneath them.

No, wind-brother! Run!

The red horse ran, as fast as the sunrise. The fire ran swift behind.

Midmorning caught them too far from the river, and even the great horse was tiring beneath the double weight. He ran slower now, but his head was still up, though his breath came faster and his sides heaved, he still snorted defiance at the wind. Col could feel against his mind the blind courage of the beast, that didn't know why this race must be run but ran anyway, and fought him when he tried to slow the pace. He began to look for another rise, a likely place for a backfire.

Tam Kiel twisted to look at him.

"We're going to stop?" she shouted into the wind. He nodded.

The stallion stumbled, breaking stride. Col caught him, felt Tam Kiel's body seconding his as he steadied the horse. They hadn't ridden together since they were children—it was good, this way.

Col swung to the ground. "We rest."

This was a rise, not tall enough and dense with prairie grass, but as good a place as any to wait for the fire. She stood and watched him as he clawed at the grass, trying to get down to raw earth. If he could only build a fire-break—but there wasn't time. She touched his shoulder.

"Verrin," she said. "You shouldn't have come."

He looked up at her. "Why not? You were already dead."

The stallion called to him, horse-mind tugging at his as he looked into her eyes. She felt the pull too, and suddenly smiled. The river wasn't that far for an unburdened horse. He walked to the stallion.

"Wind-brother," he whispered, voice, not mind. The stallion whickered, nuzzling his shoulder. He filled his mind with images of fire and running, free running horses in deep, cool water.

To the river, wind-brother. You know the way.

The horse snorted, disturbed.

There will be wild ones there. Run, wind-brother, as I have with you.

He ran his hand down the silken sweated neck, gently lifting the heavy mane. Better this way than the fire, or the knife.

The horse snorted again, and pulled free from his touch. Col stood watching him go until he felt Tam Kiel come up behind him.

"Col," she said, and smiled again. "I can dig too."

So they both worked on the fire-break while the burning wind swept over them and the morning grew old, and they were both very much afraid of death and pain and wanted very much to live. And when it became clear that the fire would get there much too soon, they stood together by the small wall of earth and looked back the way they had come, and Tam came into his arms and he kissed her. Hope before life after all, it seemed.

They could hear the fire now, a dim hissing in the distance disturbing the unnatural quiet in which they stood, body pressed to body in proud affirmation of life and living things. He could hear the pounding of his own heart in his ears, of hers beneath his hand, and it seemed that their minds touched for the first time even as the noise of thunder reached them.

Thunder?

Startled, Col looked at the clear blue sky. If it rained—but there were no clouds, and there would be no rain today, the priests wouldn't let it rain today.

"Look!" Tam shouted against the fire and noise. She raised her hand towards the river, and ground shook beneath them. "Col, the horses!"

Horses! He gasped in shock, felt his blood slow. A herd of wild horses, a herd of herds still wet from the river—more horses than he'd ever seen or dreamed of seeing in one place before, racing madly towards them—towards the fire!

"They can't!" he shouted. "They'll be killed! We have to turn them!"

He raised his arms, and then saw the red kinghorse who screamed in anger, in challenge, and saw that the great herd was already beginning to turn. It was circling behind them, racing in a great curve between them and the fire. Mares, early foals, stallions, young horses, ran in a giant circle around the two-legged pair in their midst. The thunder of their passing was worse than any storm, and the earth shook as their hooves moved it, turning clods of grass into a ditch that was wider and deeper than any Col had imagined.

"The firebreak!" Tam cried. "They're digging it for us!"

And the wild horses milled around them, nervous in the presence of fire and humans. The heavy pregnant mares and the smaller foals moved to the center, the others formed a ring around the vulnerable ones inside as if the fire were a pack of winter wolves come down from the mountains. Col and Tam clung to each other, jostled by rough bodies and surrounded by the damp, acrid scent of horses and fear and fire. Smoke swept over and around them as if they were in a tent of flames, and they gasped for breath together. If the horses were too near the flames—if it got too hard to breathe—

The mares squealed their terror. They could still panic and break for the river or even for the fire in madness. Col reached out with his mind, found the kinghorse and steadied him, and

They could hold the herd safe in the center of the earthen ring for as long as they had air.

Suddenly, the flames were hot around them, roaring with a surreal, alien rage. Fire swept over the earth, leaving scorched blackness in its wake. Their eyes teared with smoke, their skin and hair grew hot with reflected heat. Col felt the cutting-knife at his belt and the hiltless one in his boot grow warm; metal searing flesh even through leather sheaths. He clung to Tam, to the great horse-mind, fought for air and strength and prayed to whatever god might listen that the fire could not cross stripped, churned ground. The fire rider was supposed to have a chance...

Then the heat lessened. The fire crackled around them like a sulky child told to go where he does not wish, leaving them as scorched as the land and flecked with sparks of red heat, but whole. They breathed, and looked into each other's red, tear-streaked faces, and dared not let go. How could it be over? They waited, still afraid.

Soon the great herd stirred in the fire's passing. Each mare called her own foal, each stallion commanded his own mares with shrill whistles. The lead mares stepped delicately onto the still-warm ground, nosing where it was safe to walk. Stallions snorted challenge at each other, screamed challenge: the fire truce was over.

Finally, they were all gone, except for the red stallion who stood patiently at the outer edge of the circle, his black mane rippling in the wind. Col walked to him, touched his shoulder with one trembling hand.

"How did he know?" Tam asked, finding her voice, which was hoarse with smoke. "How did they know what to do?"

"He must have seen it in my mind," Col said, his own voice rough. "He's the kinghorse, he's used to commanding others and to protecting the young of his herd. Even us. He must have seen in my mind what we were going to try, and he brought the herd from the river to help us."

Col touched the stallion again with his mind, lightly. *Go free, wind-brother. For now and forever.*

The stallion snorted. He nuzzled Col one last time, then turned and raced across the prairie like a living flame.

"He's not going back to the plains-herds?" Tam Kiel asked.

"No." Col said. "He'll find a wild herd of his own, I think. There's nothing for him with the tame ones anymore."

He paused and looked at her. "Well, sister-of-my-heart?"

"Well, what?"

"What now?"

They could go back: he could see the possibility in her eyes. They could go back and challenge the priests who had sent her and her horse to their deaths, against their own law. And the people, who trusted the priests to tell them how to live would be afraid, would believe the god was angry, and the land would grow dark with their fear.

They had faced the fire and lived, by a miracle of wild horses and love. Around them was the smell of burning and of the good, rich earth beneath the burning: spring.

She smiled at him, eyes, face, mind. "Why, we walk, horse-brother. We walk to the river. There is nothing for us with the tame ones anymore."

They set off together, hand in hand like children, with all the world opening before their steps.

❧*Mary Frances Zambreno*

# COMING UP!!!

## Our Next Issue will feature a wonderful science fiction story by Jo Clayton:

# *Change*

with one of the most fascinating aliens ever to appear in print. This is what induced me to develop an issue which has the real feel of fantasy even though most of it is science fiction.

We surround it with a garland of other fine stories. This combination of science fiction and fantasy is what I like to read best. Hoping you are the same. Stay tuned to our magazine and order your copy now—and one for a friend—you won't want to miss this issue.

—MZB

ALICIA AUSTIN

# Where is the Great Spirit, Killing Rain?

## by Dayl Waldron

The young man crouched down before the hide flap of Gray Wolf's lodge. What challenge would the old shaman demand to prove his manhood?

"Great one, it is I, Killing Rain."

"Grace my lodge, Killing Rain."

The youth slipped inside to greet his mentor, but froze when he saw the shaman's face. Gray Wolf was smiling! On this solemn day, the old fellow was grinning from ear to ear. Poor soul, Killing Rain thought, the years must be adding up faster than he'd realized.

"Killing Rain, I have thought long about your direction. There is a question you need answered to continue your journey. And you must ask it of wolf, owl, bear, raven, and coyote."

The youth's eyes became wide moons, his mouth dry. He asked, "What question?"

"'Where is the great spirit?' of course."

Dazed, Killing Rain muttered, "But, but coyote?"

"We learn from the tricksters too." The old man shrugged. It was not that Gray Wolf was callous. He worried about Killing Rain. The youth was honest, brave, loyal, everything elders like to see in those who will one day replace them. But Killing Rain was too serious. He seldom laughed or even smiled. It was as if trickster coyote (despising perfection) had stolen his humor.

He was born seventeen springs ago, on a freezing night that winter had reclaimed. His mother, already weak from the cruel season, did not live to suckle him.

Though cherished by his father and tribe, he carried the weight of the universe on his shoulders. He strived to always behave correctly. This charmed most people, but Gray Wolf grieved for the naughty child that never was.

At puberty, Killing Rain climbed Alone Mountain where he fasted three days and nights. He returned with visions of an orderly world where life was predictable and the spirits benign. Gray Wolf had sighed to himself then, and hoped the next few years would bring a change.

There had been a glimmer of hope. A young woman from another clan had caused the youth's heart to fly. Killing Rain met her at the end of Peace Creek. There all travelers could speak to each other without fear. It was a sacred place where no blood could fall. But he was of the Raven clan and she the Bear. Though his heart protested, his head accepted grimly that beyond this place their people were enemies, since the potlatch exchanges had ended many years ago.

Her name was Long River. Occasionally he watched her from a knoll above her village, but did not question aloud the grudge between their people.

* * *

The wolf pack prowls the spruce timber searching for deer. The scar-jawed loner that Killing Rain tracked down waited at a jackrabbit hole, drowsing.

Killing Rain called out to warn of his approach.

"Grrr!" The wolf pierced him with yellow eyes. "I smell fear. Never trust those who smell of fear. Could it be that you've come to kill me?"

"No, ancient one." The wolf's nose is gone, Killing Rain thought, but said softly, "I come with a question. I need to know—" he paused to search for the words. "I've come to ask, where do you find the Great Spirit?"

The yellow eyes dimmed. "Another one of those," the wolf muttered. "Come along. I'll show you."

Killing Rain knew enough not to hesitate when following a wolf. Crashing through the woods toward the open meadow, it was all he could do to

# Where Is the Great Spirit, Killing Rain?

keep the wolf in sight.

At the edge of the clearing the wolf allowed him to catch up. Then together they ran across grass and flowers. His fingers brushed the furry back for a thrilling instant, then the wolf sprinted. The streak of muscle running free awed him. Killing Rain's legs strained, feet pounding Mother Earth. The old wolf was gone. When he finally stopped, his legs and pride ached.

What good was this? He could never run as fast as even an old tired wolf. If that was where wolf found the Great Spirit, it would do Killing Rain no good. Though he felt the thrill, he could never be as fast, free, or alone.

A rotting hole in a mistletoe-laden oak tree housed an owl known to tolerate respectful humans. Killing Rain thought this a much better chance. The wisdom of the owl surely would lead him to the Great Spirit.

He scrambled up the grayed, canyoned bark to perch next to the small spotted owl. "Rare wise one, pray tell me where to find the Great Spirit?"

The owl rolled its eyes skyward and held them there. Killing Rain waited patiently, but finally—accidentally, of course—the young man cleared his throat. Owl's eyes snapped back. "Think! You must sit and think." That's all the feathered creature would say. So Killing Rain sat, and thought as profoundly as any seventeen year old can, until his body began to hurt, which then profoundly filled his world.

Owl remained silent, as the young man slowly lost feeling in his haunches. But Killing Rain was determined that he would find the Great Spirit.

The sun warmed the young man's shoulders, his mind flittered– could that be the beginning? He wobbled backward on his perch, then fell down, down to the hard dirt below.

Killing Rain collected himself and his dignity from beneath the oak tree. A young body could take many such falls, though his pride was not as flexible.

As he hiked to the den of the sow bear, he pictured himself sitting in the oak tree. How ridiculous he had looked, what a fool. Dozing in a tree, waiting for the Great Spirit. Killing Rain was suddenly aware of his mouth twitched into a smile.

He would be on his toes if the bear made strange requests.

Bear emerged from her cave with two cubs. Black, bushy, and all business; she had no time for the young human. But if Killing Rain was anything, he was persistent.

He would carry out Gray Wolf's directive.

"Please, she-bear, tell me where to find the Great Spirit."

"Not now!" she growled. "Come back in the fall. That's the time."

"But, bear, how can it be that the Great Spirit comes only in the fall? I am in need now! Surely those of solid heart who truly seek the Great Spirit can be rewarded at any time?" The sow looked at the human with flinty eyes, and breathed musky breath in his face.

"All right, let's see what you have to offer." With a flip of a paw she whipped off his loin cloth to see him. His knife fell to the ground, and he leaped a man-length backward. She stared, then ambled off without comment.

Killing Rain roared deep from the belly. Anger and humiliation shook him. He retrieved his knife, and the loin cloth from the ground where bear had discarded it, shook it twice at the sky. "No!" he shouted. This he knew, bear's Great Spirit, all wrapped in bringing forth cubs, was not his.

Hot, energized by his aggravation, he ran through the broad-leaved wood. He was still livid when he stumbled upon Raven. The blue-black scavenger feasted on a large elk carcass.

"Join me to find the Great Spirit," Raven cawed.

In his angry state Killing Rain forgot himself and tore into the putrid flesh. The normally clear-headed Killing Rain knew that this would make him just as wretchedly ill as he became.

Lying on a creek bank, soothing his various ills, Killing Rain wished that his name might be Frog. The fool of the water. Rolling his tongue out for flies. He visualized it, then himself with his tongue rolled out. A quick laugh escaped him. He saw himself feasting with raven. What an idiot! He laughed deeper, his body joining, then descending to a moan. He would not find the Great Spirit by the strength of his legs. Certainly not by the depth of his thoughts, or profundity of his loins. And as for the stretch of his gut, it was not his chosen path.

As his body slowly forgave him, he thought for hours, truly thought.

His first thought was that the Great Spirit would have to come forward and bite him before he'd go ask coyote anything.

But he later thought of Gray Wolf, and his many kindnesses to him as a child. Always when his own father was busy hunting, the old shaman would care for him. Without him there would have been an even emptier spot in his life.

There must be a reason.

He found coyote lying on a rock sunning himself. Brown, crafty eyes sized up the human.

"Well, Killing Rain, where would you find the Great Spirit?" coyote asked, before the young man could open his mouth. "My friends showed you where their own Great Spirit is. Now show me where you find yours."

Killing Rain stared at the coyote, and tried to visualize him on a spit. Another image kept intruding. He pushed it aside, but there it was. Long River. He watched her from the ridge overlooking her village. He had never seen anyone who smiled so freely. A sweet smile that reached into him.

Coyote watched Killing Rain from his place in the sun, flecking his tail rhythmically from side to side.

"You need this woman, Killing Rain. Her village is near."

The young man sat down on the ground facing coyote. "So, coyote, what trick are you knifing me with? It must be a rotten one to compete with what I've already accomplished today. Perhaps you would have me walk into the Bear Clan village and demand Long River from her family?"

"They may respect your bravery."

Killing Rain laughed. "Respect a fool? Coyote, if it is your pleasure to see me killed today, you must do better."

"I want nothing more than for you to find the Great Spirit, Killing Rain. Surely you see that I am right about Long River?"

Killing Rain did not answer.

"Just her smile should tell you that she can give you what you lack. True?"

Still Killing Rain was silent.

"What did that sorry old shaman, Gray Wolf, send you to find?" coyote asked.

"The Great Spirit, pitiful old coyote."

"That's all? Tsk-tsk. You are a slow one. Trust me—it is Long River you seek. Perhaps you could steal her away when she next goes to Peace Creek, then run to live in the woods."

Killing Rain shook his head sadly. "Let me show you a vision, crafty-one." His mind filled with the dying images of his mother. "Even with the care of all our people she could not survive the cruel winter. I will not drag Long River into isolation. That is not life."

The young man stared at coyote, then through him. "Why has Gray Wolf sent me here? What possible use are you?"

The answer which came to Killing Rain surprised him for its simplicity. He would fix what needed to be fixed.

Quickly he pulled out his obsidian bladed knife and with one swipe severed coyote's tail.

"Treachery!" howled coyote. "You are worse than Gray Wolf."

"Thank you, trickster. You must do me a service, and I will return your tail."

"Grrr ... What?"

"Go to my village. Tell Gray Wolf that messengers await him at Peace Creek."

"You will be sorry someday," coyote snarled, but slunk away on his errand.

Killing Rain raced to the Bear Clan village, slowing only at the edge, to the dignified pace of brave messenger. People stared at the coyote tail he held carelessly in one hand.

"A brave one!" were the whispers.

He marched to the longest lodge and called out, "Great Bear Clan, I bring greetings from the Raven Clan."

A man a head taller than Killing Rain stepped forward. Killing Rain stood firm, though his heart tried to escape. The anger in the tall chief's face changed to astonishment when he saw the coyote's tail Killing Rain clutched.

"The coyote tried to keep me from my pledge. The trickster prefers that we not heal old wounds. I bring the hope of peace from the Raven Clan."

The chief absorbed this and nodded. "It is coyote's way."

Killing Rain spoke slowly, "The Raven Clan humbly calls you to Peace Creek to speak of the potlatch."

The chief stared at Killing Rain, measuring him; he finally said, "But we must hold the first potlatch, Brave-one."

"As you wish," Killing Rain replied, giving the Bear Clan chief the honor and advantage of being first in the cycle of potlatches. "Let me accompany you."

It was a good sign when both clans arrived at Peace Creek together, according to the old ones.

Gray Wolf came directly to Killing Rain. "You have certainly wrestled with the Great Spirit."

Killing Rain laughed loudly. "Only after I made a fool of myself."

"But does it matter now?"

Still smiling, Killing Rain shook his head.

"I must go now, Killing Rain, and attend to the chiefs' discussion and nurture what you have started."

Gray Wolf began to turn, then remembered, "Oh, there is a very humble coyote waiting for you at the edge of the woods."

Killing Rain set out first to find Long River. She waited by the creek. Her smile made him tingle. She spoke softly, "I don't know if I should cry, laugh, or scold you."

"Why, what ever do you mean?"

Her laugh was as free as a child's. "The chiefs may be fooled by your innocent bravery, but I—"

"Yes?"

"Perhaps I will be fooled too."

"I would never try to fool you. Come walk with me, Long River. There is a coyote I would like you to meet."

*Dayl Waldron*

# Darrell Schweitzer Interviews

# *Evangeline Walton*

Evangeline Walton is one of the great names in American fantasy fiction, but for her fame was a long time in coming. In 1989 she was awarded the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement.

Her First novel, *The Virgin and the Swine*, a superb treatment of the Fourth Branch of the medieval compendium of Welsh legends, the Mabinogion, appeared in 1936, but sank without a trace. Volumes based on the other three Branches went unpublished at that time. In 1945, Arkham House published her Gothic horror novel, *Witch House*. This sold slowly, and was still in print (at the 1945 price!) as late as the early 1970s. She had one (as yet unreprinted) story in *Weird Tales* in 1950, and one historical novel of the Viking age, *The Cross and the Sword* published in 1956. (Canadian/British title: *The son of Darkness*.) From the 1940s on, she worked patiently on her Theseus trilogy, which also took decades to get into print.

Then, in 1970 Lin Carter reprinted *The Virgin and the Swine* in the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series under the title *The Island of the Mighty*, and Walton's luck changed. The book was instantly recognized as one of the true masterpieces of fantasy fiction, and the sudden demand brought the other three Mabinogion novels into print: *The Children of Llyr* (1971), *The Song of Rhiannon* (1972) and *The Prince of Annwn* (1974). They have been selling steadily ever since.

The first volume of her Theseus trilogy, *The Sword Is Forged*, was published by Timescape in 1983.

*Q:* One of the things that's always impressed me about your career is how much sheer patience you must have, to have held out for almost forty years before you suddenly became famous in the 1970s. How did you do it?

**Walton:** As for patience, I just gritted my teeth and went on. That was all there was to it.

*Q:* Was it possibly that the world wasn't ready for *The Virgin and the Swine* in 1936?

**Walton:** I don't know. It seemed like nobody was making a go of fantasy in 1936. My book hit the market the same time *Gone with the Wind* did, and you can imagine how much chance anything had against *Gone with the Wind*.

*Q:* Had you actually finished the other four Mabinogion books at that time, or were they rewritten or finished later, nearer to when they saw print?

**Walton:** I wrote them from scratch after *The Virgin and the Swine*. I was still in Indianapolis then. The only book written from scratch in Arizona was *The Cross and the Sword*. I might have finished the other three Mabinogion books in the '30s. I'm not sure now. I know I did the first draft of the Theseus trilogy before World War II was quite over.

*Q:* You must have had some faith that all this material eventually would be published, however long it took.

**Walton:** Naturally, while you're at work on a labor of love, anything seems possible. I certainly had enough uncertainties between my sessions at the typewriter. Either a thing is there and has to come out, or it doesn't, I think.

*Q:* You were certainly fortunate that the material wasn't topical, but instead completely timeless, so, for all one generation of readers got cheated out of reading these books, from the present-day reader's point of view it didn't matter that they took so long to get published.

**Walton:** Well, my material is what is now considered timeless, thank Heaven. When I first tried to publish it, it was considered all out-of-date.

*Q:* You mean critics and publishers figured, well, nobody reads Cabell anymore, so nobody will read this stuff?

**Walton:** Yes. I don't think Cabell read me, though.

*Q:* My point is that Cabell himself was regarded as very out-of-date by 1939 or so.

**Walton:** He retired as James Branch Cabell sometime in the '30s. The he appeared as plain Branch Cabell in a few years, and you were supposed to think it was somebody else. That's my recollection of the situation, in any case.

*Q:* Had you read anybody else's treatment of the Welsh material, such as Kenneth Morris's *Book of the Three Dragons* before you wrote *The Virgin and the Swine* and the others?

**Walton:** No. At the time I was working on the Mabinogion material, I thought it was still virgin, that nobody else had handled it. I am very glad I didn't know about Kenneth Morris's admirable books until later.

*Q:* You were presumably mostly familiar with the Lady Guest translation of the Mabinogion?

**Walton:** Oh, yes. That was all I had to work on for a while. I couldn't find any other English translation. Of course she was writing in Victorian times and had to be careful– lady-like in Queen Victoria's senses– and there was a place or two where I wasn't sure what really happened. I could only guess. I had a cousin who was teaching in the New England Conservatory of Music at the time, and he was well acquainted with

Harvard. So I sent copies of the debatable passages to him, and he got a translation from Harvard's Professor Robinson.

*Q:* In such a case of the traditional material being vague or elusive, how much leeway do you give yourself to simply make up what is either missing or implied?

**Walton:** I don't like to contradict anything positively stated in myth. If there are alternate versions I feel free to choose the one I like best. I also feel free to make any additions that don't contradict the original material.

*Q:* The Fourth Branch of the Mabinogion, which you turned into *The Virgin and the Swine*, is needless to say only a tenth as long as your novel. So, how did you go about fleshing the original material out?

**Walton:** I read all I could find about matriarchy, notably Briffault's *The Mothers* and Sir John Rhys's *Celtic Folklore*. It was like planting seeds—things somehow just sprouted, and fell into new patterns and shapes. The first Branch, which I did last, was my greatest problem: harder to write, for some reason, than any of the others. It has the modern formula—boy meets girl; boy and girl get split up; boy and girl find each other again—so it should have been the easiest. But somehow it was the hardest. I had never been satisfied with my original treatment, and I didn't want to resurrect it at first, but Ballantine wanted all four Branches, and since they'd been nice about the other three, I thought I really owed it to them.

*Q:* How did you come to write *Witch House?*

**Walton:** I had had an extremely unpleasant summer. There was a little growth that had to be removed from one arm, and something went wrong, and they kept having to skin the wound every other day all summer. I couldn't think of anything pleasant. Horror isn't my regular field, but I felt too mauled to write anything else that summer.

*Q:* Other than the one story in Weird Tales, "At the End of the Corridor," you never returned to the horror field after that.

**Walton:** No. I'm too squeamish to write anything in the modern way, I guess. An attempt to bring *Witch House* back a few years ago didn't work, although it had been in print for thirty-two years after its first publication. I'm too mild for nowadays.

*Q:* How is it that the British edition is 20,000 words longer than the Arkham House version?

**Walton:** The British publishers asked me to write that. They said it was too short to sell well in England. At first I couldn't think of what to do. The book seemed complete as it was. So I tore my hair and after a while wrote the twenty-thousand extra words. Hearing that the book wouldn't sell without them was a most convincing argument.

*Q:* Was the modern paperback the Arkham House text or the British?

**Walton:** The Arkham House. I still have a few copies around of the British edition. I think the British made a paperback of their own. But I never got hold of that.

*Q:* Which version do you prefer?

**Walton:** I still think the original is better structurally. Since I wrote the additions, though, I naturally want people to like them.

*Q:* What is the news on your Theseus trilogy? Is the rest of it coming out soon?

**Walton:** I finished the second volume last Sunday. ((August 27, 1989–D.S.)) There is still a lot of revision to be done. Of course there was a first draft made of all three during World War II, but then I had to move to Arizona under rather trying circumstances. There had been deaths in my family. Then for several years I didn't get back at it. Mary Renault's Theseus books had been published in the meantime; and that meant I had to lay mine away for twenty years. So after that, when I did get back to work on it again, there had been a lot of new archeological discoveries and many old ideas had been exploded. So I had to do the books all over from scratch.

*Q:* Have you plans for anything beyond the Theseus books?

**Walton:** Well, I'd like to do a little more, but I'll be eighty-two in November. So it's a toss-up. I suppose I'll be doing well if I get the whole trilogy out in my lifetime.

*Q:* Do you ever think that if only your books had become successful much earlier, it would have encouraged you to have written more? Or have you written what you were going to anyway?

**Walton:** Yes to your first question.

*Q:* Who were your favorite writers, back when you were beginning your career, who might be counted as influences?

**Walton:** Really my most formative influences were the Celtic Twilight writers. I was quite crazy about them for a number of years before I went to work on my Mabinogion stuff. At that time I thought the Welsh material was a virgin field, and I didn't think I could dare rival any of my beloved Celtic Twilight writers in Irish mythology, so I never tried to touch that.

*Q:* Would you now?

**Walton:** No, I don't think I would. I still cherish my memories of theirs. The characters they drew seemed to me to be the way they ought to be, which would leave me no room for new conceptions.

*Q:* You mean Lady Gregory's books and the like?

**Walton:** William Butler Yeats and especially James Stephens. James Stephens used to be my bible. I know that when I was working on the proofs of my first book I came across a sentence that I was sure I had unintentionally borrowed from him. So that held the proofs up for three days, while I hunted up said sentence, for three days. I had to think of something else. Then the editor told me later that one sentence wouldn't have mattered in the least. I realized I'd made a fool of myself. But for years I couldn't bear to read my beloved Stephens again. After all this frenzied cramming, I was fed up on him.

*Q:* Did you read Lord Dunsany?

**Walton:** I can't think how I came to forget him, because I loved his style. Of course I like mythological subject matter better, but Dunsany's style is unique.

*Q:* Have you ever wanted to write American material?

**Walton:** I'm afraid I haven't got any gift for it. I seem to have to go back two or three thousand years.

*Q:* Can you tell us anything about the new Theseus book?

**Walton:** It's the second one, the one in which I—or rather, he—has the arguments with bulls and snakes. It's the Cretan adventure. The book published in 1983, was about Theseus and the Amazons. It is customary to put the Cretan adventure first in Theseus's life, but a fragment exists of one of Euripides's plays in which the child Hippolytus laments his father's departure for Crete. It seems unlikely that Hippolytus was born before his father met his mother, so I put the Amazon adventure first.

*Q:* What about the third book?

**Walton:** Of course I have the World War II first draft of that, which will take a lot of revision, but maybe less than the other two.

*Q:* Thank you, Evangeline Walton.

❧ *Darrell Schweitzer*

JAMES BALKOVEK

# HEART'S DESIRE

by Patricia Duffy Novak

The small hand squirmed in Treya's grasp. "I'm so tired," the little girl said. "Is it much farther?"

The slender woman pulling the scarf away from her mouth, revealed her deformed lower face. She never willingly showed her face, uncovered, to anyone, but the child was blind. "Shh. We must creep through the heart of the woods silently lest we wake the dryads." Treya spoke softly and forced her voice to steadiness.

The shadows of the forest dappled the child's gaunt face, transforming it into a mottled death's head. Treya blinked, vanquishing the grotesque illusion, and bent down towards the child until the girl's countenance emerged from the gloom.

The child clutched Treya's hand and whimpered. "Treya, I'm frightened," she whispered. Tears filled her large, sightless eyes.

Treya hugged the child. "Come," she said. "We must pass through before night falls."

They progressed slowly. In spite of Treya's care, the child stumbled repeatedly over tree roots, fallen branches, and other obstacles on the path. The girl had lost her sight in an accident only a few months before and had yet to acquire the visionless perception of the blind.

As Treya led the child through the dank undergrowth, she wondered, not for the first time, about the wisdom of bringing the child on this trek. Pilgrims, even sighted swordsmen, seldom braved the expanse of murky forest that lay beyond the Northern boundary of Mboka-na-Nsili. In the taverns of the Southland, minstrels chanted legends of the Dryad's Woods. Only a handful of ancient heroes had survived the perils of the journey to win through to the Northland, where the Ice Witch would grant a boon to the worthy.

As the afternoon darkened into dusk, Treya's thoughts strayed to the fortune-hunters who never returned. The fire-side tales warned that malevolent wood sprites cursed intruders with lunacy, luring the unwary from the narrow trail. How could she, Treya, an inept healer armed only with an herb dagger, dare to guide a blind child of seven through the enchanted forest? Perhaps the sprites had already afflicted her with fairy madness.

Still, what else could she have done with the girl? The child's parents, peasant farmers, had brought her to Treya for healing; but the accident, a tumble down a cliff, had inflicted more damage than Treya's humble skills could mend. The girl remained blind. The farmers had given Treya a small sum of money to take Pillim to a city and establish her in the harlot's trade, a profession in which sightlessness need not prove a handicap. Treya, though, had grown fond of the child and could not bring herself to abandon the girl to such a life. The legends of the Ice Witch offered their only hope. Alone, Treya had barely managed an existence as an itinerant healer. The squalid towns and villages of the Southland held no shelter for a deformed woman saddled with a blind child.

Treya prayed fervently that the two of them would survive the passage through the forest. The Ice Witch might then accord them their hearts' desires, restoring the child's sight and correcting the deformity Treya had suffered with since birth. Then the rest of their lives, if far from soft and pleasant, would at least not be impossible.

The path twisted, and Pillim stumbled again. This time Treya failed to catch her, and the child sprawled across the forest floor. "Don't cry, don't cry," Treya warned, stooping over the trembling child and running her hands along the girl's limbs. Fortunately, the child had not seriously injured herself.

Pillim's lips trembled. "I'm cold," she said, "and tired."

Treya set her pack on the ground, drew out a woolen muffler, and wrapped it about the girl. The child, she observed, was at the end of endurance. She could travel no farther without rest.

Treya settled her back against a wide oak bole and allowed Pillim to fall asleep in her lap. Treya craved a fire and hot food, but burning the fallen branches of the enchanted trees would alert the sprites to the presence of mortals in the forest. She snuggled against the child, endeavoring to protect her from the chill autumn wind.

Although she meant to keep vigil, Treya, too, must have slept for a while. She opened her eyes on blackness more somber than a wraith's breath. No moonlight disturbed the darkness. Treya heard the regular breathing of the child, sensed the warm weight against her chest, but she could not discern even the outlines of the girl's form.

No sounds besides their own disturbed the stillness of the forest. Treya shivered and pulled her cloak tighter about her shoulders as she wondered what beasts lurked silently in the gloom. She stared into the blackness. Eyes, glowing green eyes, stared back. Treya gasped; the child in her arms murmured. When Treya looked again, the eyes had vanished.

Treya let out her breath in a long exhalation. The night had barely begun and already she envisioned chimerical monsters. How would she endure until morning? Nothing stirred in the forest, she told herself; no creatures prowled in the trees. She forced herself to calmness, nearly managing to smile at her fancies.

The eyes winked back into view. Treya sat up abruptly, waking Pillim. "What's wrong?" the girl asked. Treya clamped a hand over the child's mouth. The eyes, green magic pools, no animal eyes, moved closer.

"Treya, Treya, what is it?" Pillim asked, wresting her face free of the woman's grip and struggling up beside her. "Tell me, please, what's wrong?"

Through a haze of wonderment, Treya heard the child speaking, but did not answer; she could not. Before her stood the most beautiful man she had ever seen. She stared into emerald eyes that glowed so brightly they illuminated the being's unearthly face. High, prominent cheekbones caught the light from his eyes. Full, shapely lips twisted gently into a smile.

"Look," he said. His lips did not move, but she heard him clearly. He opened his hands, spread his long, slender fingers, and the darkness receded. A gentle, yellow light bathed his form. Ebony hair, long and loose, flowed over his shoulders. A moss-green cloak swathed his elongated form.

"Come," he said. Again, his lips did not move. "I will give you your heart's desire." He beckoned to her, but Treya shook her head. The last threads of her consciousness warned her to remain on the path.

The being smiled and touched his fingertips lightly together, then spread his hands as if forming a frame. "Look," he said again.

Treya gazed into the space enclosed by his hands. She saw her own face reflected, as if in a mirror. Her brows, slender and arched, shaded wide brown eyes. Her nose, thin and straight, divided her upper face into perfect symmetric halves. The worn, brown scarf, draped softly about her chin, hid her lower face from view.

"Remove the scarf," he said. Treya trembled, but found herself unable to resist this command. She drew the scarf slowly away from her face and then stared in wonder at her own image. A perfect chin and full-lipped mouth completed the picture of a beautiful visage. "It cannot be," she said.

"Treya, what did you say?" Pillim asked, voice high with alarm.

"Can't you hear him?" Treya murmured. She pushed Pillim away and lurched forward towards the demon-elf. The being stepped away, into the timber. Treya stumbled after him.

Pillim caught Treya's cloak. "Treya," she wailed. "Where are you going? Is someone here?"

Treya swatted at the girl, but Pillim clung all the harder. The wood sprite glided through the trees, distancing himself from the path. "Come and

# Heart's Desire

dance," he implored. The soft tones of his voice shivered in the autumn air.

Treya swayed in time to faint strains of music that drifted through the trees. The dryads, gathering in celebration, called her to the dance. Treya struggled feebly against Pillim's hold, her will so ensorcelled by the dryad that she could not break even the child's slender grasp. "Let me go. Let me go," Treya intoned, eyes fixed on the ephemeral form of the sprite.

"Treya, no," the child cried. As Pillim held her, the demon-elf at last vanished behind the trees. As soon as the sprite was out of her sight, the spell broke, and Treya collapsed against the damp ground.

Pillim's hand stole across Treya's cheek, brushing the short curls from her eyes. "Are you all right?" the child whispered.

Treya sat up. "My face." She hurriedly touched the lower half of her face, felt the flat deformity, and groaned in disappointment.

Pillim sobbed, a short, frightened burst, and then stifled her crying against Treya's knees. "Hush, hush," Treya said, coming quickly back to full awareness. "It's all right. I'm fine. You saved me, Pillim."

The child sniffled. "What happened?" she asked. "You tried to run off into the forest. I was so scared."

"A wood sprite found us," Treya answered. "Didn't you hear him?"

The child shook her head. "I only heard you," she said. "And I couldn't see anything, of course."

Treya patted the child's hand, and smiled grimly. "We'll pass the rest of the night safely." She took her scarf and tied it around her own eyes. If what she could not see could not harm her, there would be no further danger.

She and Pillim settled back into the shelter of the enormous oak and huddled together. "I shouldn't have brought you, Pillim," Treya whispered as she tucked the edges of the blanket around the girl. "It's too dangerous."

"I wanted to come," Pillim said. "I wanted the chance to see again. And I didn't want you to go away without me." The girl squeezed Treya's hand.

Treya smiled a little then. In all her life, she had never before known the love of another human being. Her earliest memories were of blows and taunts. She had been an orphan child, raised by the sufferance of the townspeople of Klar-Hai. She knew nothing of her parentage, but she often imagined that her own mother, horrified by the monster to whom she had given birth, had fled in shame from the village. No one ever spoke to Treya of her ancestry.

She had become a healer because no other trade was open to her. No farmers would allow her to step on their land. Her face, they said, would cause the cattle to miscarry. No shop or inn would allow her on the premises. She would ruin the customers' delight in fine goods or food. Only Gritta, Klar-Hai's cantankerous healer, would take her. The old woman had used her like a slave, scolding endlessly and teaching her little. Finally, Treya had run away from the town of her birth. She had wandered throughout Mboka-na-Nsili, an itinerant healer for the poorest of the tribes. She had kept her face veiled, mixed simple elixirs for a few coppers, and fled from each group before the tribespeople could spy her affliction and drive her forth. Gods-cursed, the superstitious called her, fearing that one so marked by the Gods' ill-favor could bring disaster upon them all.

Treya slept little that night, and dreams troubled what little slumber she found. Memories of past cruelties blurred into visions of splendid creatures who summoned her to join their entourage. Several times she woke and nearly removed the veil from her eyes, but then Pillim would stir, reminding Treya of their errand.

Morning finally dawned, cold and bleak. Treya and Pillim breakfasted on cold waybread and drank sparingly of the water they had carried from the last town. Although she could hear the burbliing of water just beside the path, Treya ignored the maddening babble. The streams of the Dryad's Woods were elusive. A traveler could follow the sound of burbling water deeper and deeper into the heart of the forest.

By mid-day Treya and Pillim had passed through the Dryad's Wood. Although the forest around them remained thick and dark, Treya sensed a renewed wholesomeness. She heard the noises of small animals, scurrying through the boughs of the trees. She smelled the natural vegetative odors. "Pillim, we made it," she cried, scooping up the child in a hug. "Not much farther now."

Pillim laughed. "Then the Ice Witch will grant our wishes, won't she, Treya?"

Treya set the girl back on the ground. "I hope so," she said soberly. "But perhaps it is only a myth."

"It must be true," the child responded. "I know it is."

Treya did not share the child's simple trust, but she kept her reply light and cheerful for Pillim's sake. "Come then," she said, "to the land of Winter."

It was morning of the next day before they emerged from the forest. Treya gasped as she surveyed the desolate landscape before her. Ice and stone had frozen together into jagged spires. Ragged patches of dirty snow encrusted the dun-colored ground. Gusts of wind tore at the rime-coated branches of scraggly trees.

"I'm cold," Pillim said, rubbing her hands together. "Really cold." The temperature had fallen at least twenty degrees since they left the forest.

Treya laced the child's jacket snugly and adjusted the straps of the small fur-lined boots. Then, she searched in her pack for mittens and placed them on the girl's gelid hands. Treya had used the money from Pillim's parents to buy sturdy clothing for the child. Her own clothing, though, was worn thin in spots, and the cold bit into Treya with vengeance.

"That's a little better," Pillim said, leaning against Treya and using her for a wind-screen. "Where is the Ice Witch's cave?"

"The legends say to keep on the path a little longer. Stay behind me and hold onto my cape. I'll try to avoid the iciest patches."

They traversed the frigid fields and crossed into the harsh foothills of the Hoarfrost Mountains. The cold numbed Treya's ears and swirling ice particles stung her face. She could hear Pillim's heavy breaths as the child labored against the wind. Finally, when Treya thought they could endure no more, she spied a dark outline in a cliff. She pulled Pillim to her, bent and whispered the news into the child's ear. Treya caught Pillim up in her arms and then sped across the frozen ground, ducked into the narrow opening in the hillside, and beheld the sorceress of winter.

Her hair was the color of ancient ice, but her eyes gleamed with fire. Skin so pale it was almost transparent stretched tightly across the narrow bones of her face. Her robes of ragged rabbit skins were carelessly draped about her stooped and haggard frame. Although the cave walls blocked the worst of the wind, Treya shivered as she gazed at the Ice Witch.

"Why have you come, disturbing the peace of my Mountains?" the crone asked. Her voice thundered against the rock.

Treya clutched Pillim against her,

as if to shield the child from the witch's anger. "It is said that you will grant a wish to those who survive the journey through the Dryad's Woods," Treya said, voice barely audible.

The witch laughed. A sound like the scraping of blade against stone filled the narrow corridor of the cave. "The dryads are none of my kin," she said. "What do I care if you traverse their territory?"

"But the legends say the worthy may find succor," Treya whispered. She wiped tears from her eyes. Had she and Pillim come all this way for nothing?

The witch laughed again. Treya felt Pillim cringe. "Aye, the worthy indeed," the witch said. "And what makes you worthy, hmm?"

"We would prove our worthiness, Great Dame," Treya answered, "if you will allow."

The ancient mouth twisted into a hideous grin. "You," she said, pointing at Treya, "can be tested, but the child is too young. She must return when she is older."

Treya hesitated. "Go ahead, Treya," Pillim whispered. "We've come this far. You deserve a chance. Perhaps we can find another sorceress to help me."

Treya studied the small girl. Pillim's lower lip quivered, but she did not cry. Treya hugged her tightly. "You're a good girl, Pillim. I will always take care of you," she said. Then she turned to the witch. "What must I do?" she asked.

The Ice Witch stepped forward and stared into Treya's eyes. Her spindly fingers grasped the edge of Treya's scarf and yanked it away from her face. Treya flushed and hid her face in her hands. "I see why you have come to me, woman," the witch said.

Treya nodded, and the witch continued. "At the end of the corridor, there is a room. In the room, you will find a set of mirrors, each showing a different fate. Break the mirror of the fate you desire." The Ice Witch smiled. Treya shuddered.

The Ice Witch led Treya down the long corridor. The walls glowed with an eerie white light. "For every magical boon," said the witch, "there is a countervailing misfortune. You must select it."

Treya passed alone into a hexagonal room, the walls of which were covered with long mirrors. At first, she saw nothing but her own reflection on each surface; then other images formed. In the first panel, she saw Pillim. As she watched, the girl's lower jaw and face contorted in a mockery of Treya's own deformity. In the second panel, a newborn infant appeared with the disfigurement. In the third panel, Harkum, a man who had cheated her of her fees, was afflicted. In the fourth, she saw Gritta, the old charlatan to whom she had been apprenticed, suffer the deformity. In the fifth panel, she saw Helda, a young woman from the village where Treya had been raised. Of all people, the lovely Helda had been the cruelest to Treya. Treya stared in fascination as Helda's beauty warped into hideousness. In the last panel, Treya saw only herself, as she was now, her deformity untransformed.

Treya spun around, viewing the panels again. She would not give the deformity to Pillim or to the unknown child, but three other choices tempted her. She pulled out her dagger and hesitated before the images of Gritta, Harkum, and Helda. As she looked at Helda's laughing face and recalled the taunts and jeers, her muscles contracted. She posed to strike the glass, but at the last instant, she turned quickly away and shattered the sixth panel. Glass tinkled to the floor. Treya lowered her dagger and sobbed. She could not inflict another with her tragedy, not even Helda.

The door opened and the Ice Witch entered. "You have chosen well, daughter," she said. "There is no law that an affliction healed must be passed to another. I gave you a test. I would not grant a boon to one who wished her suffering on another soul, no matter how evil the nature of the other. Come, follow me."

The Ice Witch led Treya to a large chamber, carved from the rock. The room was lighted by an enormous fire that burned cheerfully below a stone chimney. Pillim sat near the fire, her legs tucked under a fur cover. The Ice Witch proceeded to a delicate carved-crystal chair. "Tell me your heart's desire," said the witch, seating herself. The hag smiled, gently this time.

Treya swallowed. She felt her slack and ugly mouth, her flat and repulsive lower jaw. For years, she had dreamed of this moment, when a sorceress would offer her a chance at a normal existence. Now, standing before the Ice Witch, who had the power to grant her dearest wish, Treya was paralyzed with indecision. She looked at Pillim, the child she had grown to love during the past months. Blindness was a worse affliction than ugliness.

"Heal the child," Treya said. She closed her eyes to hold back the stream of tears as she envisioned the rest of her life, always an outcast, forever unwanted.

"Again you have chosen well," said the witch. "You have proven yourself worthy. The child will see."

The witch's voice had grown soft and gentle. Treya opened her eyes and saw that the crone had vanished. In her place, stood a radiantly beautiful woman. The Ice Witch stood tall and straight, the illusion of age discarded, the dirty furs transformed into a cap of purest white. Sparkling fire, like snow in the moonlight, drifted from the witch's fingers and settled on Pillim's face.

Treya went to the child and knelt beside her. The vacant eyes gradually came into focus. "Treya, Treya, I can see," Pillim cried laughing. Treya managed a smile, although her own heart was breaking. Would Pillim turn from her in horror now that she could see?

"You're so beautiful, Treya," Pillim said, her small hand reaching for Treya's face. "I didn't know you were so beautiful."

Treya turned her head away so that the child would not see the tears in her eyes. To Pillim, she was not a monster. She reached her hand to her face, to brush away her tears, and cried out, in wonder, as her fingers traced the firm outline of a normal mouth and jaw.

She turned back to Pillim, pulled the small face closer to her own, sought her own reflection in the girl's dark eyes. Pillim had not lied; she was beautiful, as beautiful as she had ever dreamed of being.

She clutched the child to her and laughed in joy and wonder. There was nothing, nothing the two of them couldn't achieve now. They could settle in a town. Treya could complete her inadequate training with a more scrupulous healer and become the wise woman she had always dreamed of being. Pillim, too, could study the healing arts.

Treya turned away from the girl for a moment, meaning to thank the Ice Witch for her mercy, but the sorceress had vanished, leaving only a soft glow in the rapidly warming air.

❧ *Patricia Duffy Novak*

# MZB*fm* LETTERS

## Deborah Millitello
## Brighton, IL

Dear Jan,

It was such a thrill to win third place in the Dragon issue's Cauldron. "Do Virgins Taste Better?" was fun to write. I'm so glad the readers enjoyed it enough to vote for it.

Time for another Cauldron ballot. Do I really have to make a choice? This is getting harder each issue. Marion's editorial said to let you know which side of fantasy we like best: bright fantasy as in the Dragon issue or the shadows as in this one. Again, do I really have to choose? I like both. The wonderful thing about this magazine is that there is room for all types of fantasy. Keep up the good work. You're getting better every issue.

Is it my imagination, or does the man on the cover bear a close resemblance to Frank Kelly Freas? It is wonderful, all those little creatures popping out everywhere, so colorful but not overwhelming. Stephen Fabian's art for "The Playhouse" was gentle, warm, and fit so well with the story. I also liked Vincent Di Fate's artwork for "Nightside." Good artwork always enhances good stories.

Now for the stories. I loved "The Playhouse" because it had a quuzzy feel to it. (quuzzy—an adjective meaning warm and fuzzy and comfortable.) "Nightside" was very different. I'd like to see more stories about Diana and Andre. "The Last Guardian of Ru Ishtl" was deliciously satisfying. Salahar got exactly what she deserved, and in the end, what was best for her. I also enjoyed "Aventura," "Card Trick," and "The Palace of al-Tir al-Abtan," three very different stories, but each good.

Did you know that "Malavendra's Pool" and "Card Trick" were listed in the latest Nebula newsletter? That makes at least four stories from *MZB's Fantasy Magazine* that have been nominated so far. Pretty good, for a magazine that's just a year and a half old. As I said, better and better.

You asked about ideas for a promotional tour in the fall. How about this: the last weekend in October is the World Fantasy Con in Chicago. The next weekend is Windycon XVII. Two weekends at the same hotel with two major conventions and fans from all over the country, maybe even the world. If you're interested, I'll get information on the cons to you as soon as I have it.

Take care, have a safe and happy New Year. I'm counting the days until I see the Winter issue in my mailbox.

*Dear Deborah,*

*Oh I hope this issue was worth the long winter wait! Congratulations on your Cauldron win—people are anxious for more stories from you.*

*It was wonderful to see that the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) have chosen to consider some of the stories we were privileged to print for their annual award—the Nebula. At this printing, Mary C. Aldridge's story, "The Adinkra Cloth" (issue #3) is on the final ballot. We're thrilled for Mary, this was one of her first stories. And I have to tell you Marion and I cried while we were editing it! By the way—not only do we have Kelly Freas on Issue #6's cover, but on Issue #3's Cover, we have Laura. But I've met Laura and she does not have two different color eyes.! And thank you for the info on the cons - I need all the help I can get! -jlb*

*That's really helpful. But come on kids—how can we publish the stories you like best unless we know which they are? –MZB (Jan always votes against the horror––is she right?)*

## Susan L. Johnson
## Arlington, VA

Dear Ms. Burke:

For a long time in this area, I could purchase science fiction and fantasy books at only 1 or 2 stores, mostly one. I would see references to things MZB had, magazines and fanzines, in her books at times, but no way to get them was given. After the death of the owner of the best book store here, I had to find things myself and finally subscribed to every magazine I could find on these 2 subjects.

By doing this, once in awhile another somebody else would advertise their magazine and I would get that as well.

I have an old "Science Fiction Heroic Fantasy Author Index" and did have 2 until the owner of the other bookstore here wouldn't let me leave without selling it to him.

I have written to some authors and MZB kindly sent me a list of what she wrote so I can try to find it but some authors ignore me. I have sent checks or stamps or both to for fanzines and have received nothing.

I spend a lot of time and effort not to mention money just to find something to read. I not only have to pay for it, but have to winkle it out of its hiding places.

I have piles and shelves full of unfinished series that I haven't read and am trying to complete before I do read them. I keep a bulging file of what magazines (some 30) I subscribe to.

All this is getting to be a full time job.

A very good magazine named "Argos" already went under this year because no one knew how to sell it.

It took me years to find "Laus" but most people see "Isaac Asimov's Magazine," why can't you put an ad in there once in a while for MZB's various ventures that I for one would have loved to have? One of those little 2 liners would be fine and cheap too. Why not advertise in other magazines and other types of magazines too.

It seems to me that the way to sell something is <u>sell</u> it and let people buy it and not make it so hard to find someone has to spend all the time I do to find things to read that they like. Maybe I ought to take out ads and say, "Don't be coy, Roy, Sell me something."

*Dear Susan,*

*Thank you for your letter. Look for our ads! ( Chuq Von Rospach has offered to help me!) -jlb*

*My books are not intended as a series.—you can start them anywhere. –MZB*

*(continued on page 48)*

PAT MORRISSEY

# *Daughter of the Oak*

*by David M. Shea*

No one seemed to notice the naked girl standing on the corner.

It was, strictly, none of my concern if someone wanted to stand unclothed in a public place. It struck me as odd, however, that the dozens of people pouring out of the offices swirled unnoticing around her.

She looked about twenty, skinny, with long tangled dark hair and a sad bewildered expression. I had had lots of practice in minding my own business, but still...

"Excuse me," I said stupidly, "are you all right?"

She turned wide glazed-looking greeny-brown eyes on me, clutching both arms about herself as if she were cold (though in fact it was comfortable shirt-sleeve weather for early October) and shuddered. On impulse I took off my sport jacket and offered it to her. She looked at it blankly, as if not quite sure what it was for. Finally I put it around her unresisting shoulders; at which point she turned that numb expression on me again, wavered, and collapsed.

I grabbed her before she could fall. The natural inclination, of course, would be to call for help, perhaps an ambulance, and get the girl to a hospital. I'm not sure why this didn't occur to me at the time; perhaps the fact that no one else seemed to see her had some bearing on my decision.

In the end, I decided to put her in my car. (Incidentally, that nonsense about carrying someone in your arms like Superman carries Lois is just that, nonsense, unless you happen to be as strong as Superman. The only practical way for an adult to carry an adult, as I found, is either piggyback, or over one's shoulder like a sack of cement..)

Probably I made a ludicrous picture moving across the parking lot, with a young woman slung over my shoulder, wrapped with only marginal decency in my jacket. I got a chill when a police car cruised past me without hesitation; and another when John Wiley called after me, and came up with some casual remark about an account we were working on.

"John," I said on impulse, "don't you notice anything unusual?"

"Sure. It's after four on a Friday afternoon and we're still not out of here. Should there be anything else unusual?"

"No," I muttered. "Listen, John, we'll finish that case on Monday."

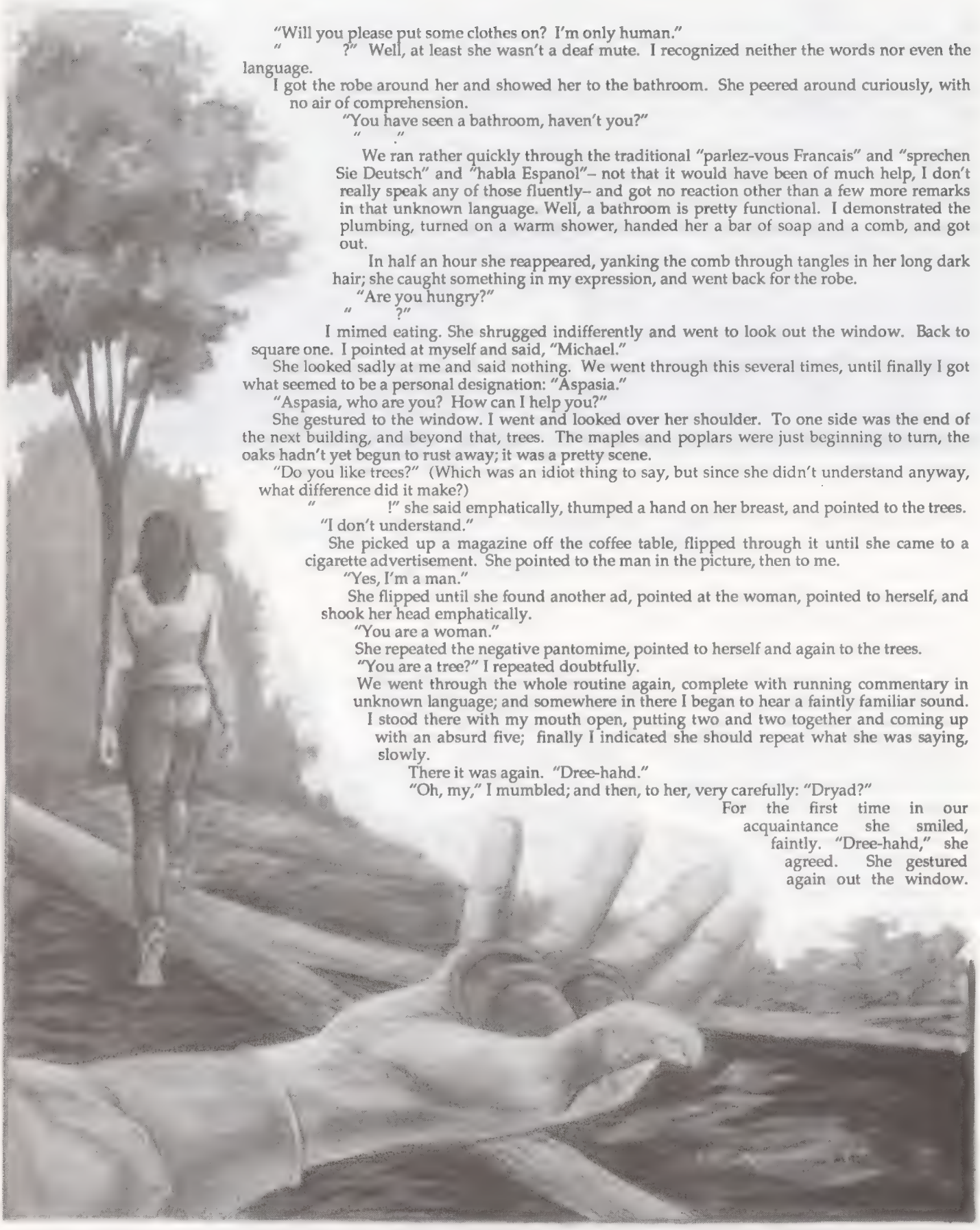
"Okay. Have a nice weekend."

For lack of something better to do, I took her home. I was getting used to the fact that no one but me could see her (though I didn't understand it). No one in the parking lot or the stairwell at my apartment building looked twice at me or my improbable burden as I lugged her up the stairs. Once in my apartment, I dumped her across the bed.

She was skinny—not fashion-model thin, but skinny like someone who hadn't eaten well for a long time—and looked as if both a bath and a comb would be welcome. She seemed to be breathing well enough, however, and her pulse and temperature seemed normal enough as well as I could judge. At least she didn't seem to be in actual clinical shock. In fact I hadn't any idea what was wrong, if anything, or what to do about it. From somewhere in the back of my mind there floated up something I attributed to Hippocrates or one of those fellows: "First, do no harm."

I threw a blanket over her and left her to sleep.

About three hours later I heard noises coming from the bedroom, and she wandered out, not troubling to bring the blanket with her. Politely averting my eyes, I fetched my bathrobe and handed it to her; she held it in her hand blankly.



"Will you please put some clothes on? I'm only human."

" ?" Well, at least she wasn't a deaf mute. I recognized neither the words nor even the language.

I got the robe around her and showed her to the bathroom. She peered around curiously, with no air of comprehension.

"You have seen a bathroom, haven't you?"

" ."

We ran rather quickly through the traditional "parlez-vous Francais" and "sprechen Sie Deutsch" and "habla Espanol"– not that it would have been of much help, I don't really speak any of those fluently– and got no reaction other than a few more remarks in that unknown language. Well, a bathroom is pretty functional. I demonstrated the plumbing, turned on a warm shower, handed her a bar of soap and a comb, and got out.

In half an hour she reappeared, yanking the comb through tangles in her long dark hair; she caught something in my expression, and went back for the robe.

"Are you hungry?"

" ?"

I mimed eating. She shrugged indifferently and went to look out the window. Back to square one. I pointed at myself and said, "Michael."

She looked sadly at me and said nothing. We went through this several times, until finally I got what seemed to be a personal designation: "Aspasia."

"Aspasia, who are you? How can I help you?"

She gestured to the window. I went and looked over her shoulder. To one side was the end of the next building, and beyond that, trees. The maples and poplars were just beginning to turn, the oaks hadn't yet begun to rust away; it was a pretty scene.

"Do you like trees?" (Which was an idiot thing to say, but since she didn't understand anyway, what difference did it make?)

" !" she said emphatically, thumped a hand on her breast, and pointed to the trees.

"I don't understand."

She picked up a magazine off the coffee table, flipped through it until she came to a cigarette advertisement. She pointed to the man in the picture, then to me.

"Yes, I'm a man."

She flipped until she found another ad, pointed at the woman, pointed to herself, and shook her head emphatically.

"You are a woman."

She repeated the negative pantomime, pointed to herself and again to the trees.

"You are a tree?" I repeated doubtfully.

We went through the whole routine again, complete with running commentary in unknown language; and somewhere in there I began to hear a faintly familiar sound.

I stood there with my mouth open, putting two and two together and coming up with an absurd five; finally I indicated she should repeat what she was saying, slowly.

There it was again. "Dree-hahd."

"Oh, my," I mumbled; and then, to her, very carefully: "Dryad?"

For the first time in our acquaintance she smiled, faintly. "Dree-hahd," she agreed. She gestured again out the window.

"Drys." Tree. I nodded. "Dree-hahd."

Just what I always needed, a minor nature goddess in my living room.

Resisting the urge to get a large glass of Scotch, I attempted to convey, "What are you doing here?"

Apparently I got my meaning across—it's amazing what you can convey to someone with whom you share no common language.

"Drys," she repeated, and then the same word again with another word, tapping herself on the breast. My tree, I understood. She made a slashing gesture, and mimed a tree falling; and tears welled up in her eyes. Finally, in a gesture which apparently hasn't changed much down the millennia, she drew a finger across her throat; and curled up into a ball on the floor, with the tears running down her face.

This time I did get myself that drink, and sat down to do some hard thinking. The suburban office-park where I worked was expanding, and out behind the new wing they were putting in a much-needed new parking lot. The first step, naturally, would be ... to cut down all the trees ...

"Aspasia," I attracted her attention. "That way?" I pointed to the southeast, toward the office. She nodded.

"Come on."

It was getting pretty dark when we arrived at the now deserted office park. We went around to the back of the new wing, and there was an acre or two of ground covered with fallen trees. Aspasia had the expression of a Jew visiting Buchenwald. From her point of view, it was that sort of obscene disaster.

She stumbled over the ground to where a large oak had been dropped: by a chain saw, by the look of it. My tree, she gestured, and repeated the throat-cutting motion; and somehow conveyed unmistakably, your fault. And then she burst into tears again, as one who can't stand it, and staggered away.

I stood there in the gathering chill for a while, touching a living thing which was now dead, and looking after another living thing which might very soon be dead; and then from somewhere an idea came to me, and I knelt in the damp soil and began searching.

I came up behind her, where she stood with her back stubbornly to the disaster.

"Aspasia?"

She turned, snarling in helpless rage.

I held out my hands with what I had found.

Acorns.

She looked numb for a moment, and then she began crying again, but it was a different sort of crying.

On the way home, I stopped at the big garden-supplies store on Reisterstown Road. There was a large beefy man behind the counter.

"I have to grow an oak tree from these acorns."

"Okay. Now first ..."

"Mister, you don't understand. It's a matter of life and death that I grow at least one oak tree from these acorns."

"Okay." He looked at me oddly, but not without sympathy. "Now, the first thing you need ..."

We made another stop at a bookstore I knew. I checked the reference section and left with a two-way, Greek-English dictionary.

By December, I had three little oak treelings sprouting in big pots in my dining room, and Aspasia's English was becoming remarkably fluent. My Greek was tolerable, though any modern resident of Athens would surely have found my accent rather odd.

"You know, Michael, that we can't live like this forever. In these pot things, I mean." (She always spoke of the saplings and herself collectively as "we".)

"How long can you live in human form? Without a tree?"

She laughed. "Oh, as long as I know that my tree exists, I can be in this form for a long time. Months, maybe even a year. But Michael, some time we will have to plant my tree, out in the open. You people, there are so many of you, and whenever you want to build something, you just go in and kill all the trees. Where is there a safe place?"

The point was well taken. I couldn't put her tree here in the apartments, it wasn't my land. Even if I did buy land, I probably wouldn't live more than another forty or fifty years at most. Who could say what would happen to my land after I was gone? Aspasia was effectively immortal as long as she had her tree in which to live; fifty years wasn't much help to her. How could I guarantee her a place where her tree wouldn't be cut down for a hundred years, two hundred years, forever?

"I have one idea," I suggested. "It's not perfect, but it's the best I can come up with."

"What?"

"I'll have to show you."

So I put her in the car and drove out Route 40.

Potapsco State Park.

What it is, mostly, is fifty or sixty thousand acres of unlogged forest. Typical North American mixed deciduous forest, with the usual smattering of evergreens. In December, with all the leaves fallen, it was cold and barren.

"Oh Michael," she said, "it's beautiful." She walked around happily patting trees, comfortable in a short-sleeved dress—"clothing," I had discovered, was an alien concept to her, and temperature didn't seem to affect her one way or the other.

If we planted her tree here, it was a calculated gamble. This was state land, commercial logging was not allowed. But politicians are notoriously changeable. Who could say what the state would do next year, next century?

"May I pick a place?"

"Suit yourself. You're going to be living here a long time. I might suggest that you move off the road a ways." If the park service ever did decide to change things, I reasoned they would probably start nearest the road. The outlying areas might be safer longer.

She disappeared into the trees. I stood shivering in the biting wind, and after a while a state police car came cruising down the park road. The trooper rolled down his window and looked at me.

"Sir."

"Hello, officer."

"Ah ... You doing anything in particular?"

"Admiring the trees," I said.

He mulled that over.

"All right, sir. You be careful with matches, now."

"I don't smoke."

"Okay," he said, still faintly puzzled, and drove away. I froze for some interminable time, and finally Aspasia came back, bubbling with enthusiasm. She had two or three places in mind and wanted me to see them all. I managed to convince her that some other warmer day would serve equally well, since we couldn't plant the still frail saplings until spring in any event.

"What a lovely place," she enthused, and spontaneously embraced me.

Finally I got her back in the car and got the heater going.

That night, for the first time, we made love.

I won't say I hadn't thought about it; but it hadn't happened. What Aspasia had thought, if the idea had ever crossed her mind prior to that December afternoon, I don't know.

All I know is that she came into the living room nude, and began to take my clothes off.

"What are you doing?"

"Is this not obvious?"

"But why?"

"Because I wish to."

So she did. We did.

The next day I gathered up all the blankets and things I had been using on

the sofa, and moved back into my bedroom.

It was the seventeenth of February, a miserable day, overcast with wet snow, and I had a bad day at the office and a hard time getting home. When I finally did get there, Aspasia was huddled up on the sofa, crying.

"What's wrong?" I asked, and then with a horrid thought: "The trees?" I ran to check the saplings, but they were sprouting as enthusiastically as ever in their big pots in the dining room. They were, in fact, growing with unnatural speed; one was almost five feet tall, and the other two over four feet, which even I knew was odd. But if they were all right ...

"Aspasia, honey, what's the matter?" I sat down and put an arm around her, and passed her a Kleenex, and finally she turned those big greeny-brown eyes on me.

"I'm pregnant."

There must, somehow, be a subtle way for a woman to convey that idea to a man.

But then, my lover was not a woman; she was a tree.

"Once before this happened," she spoke softly, as if talking more to herself than to me. "Long and long and long ago, there was a mortal man, and I bore him a child. My son, my beautiful baby son. And where is my son now, and all his children and his children's children? Gone, dust. My child is dead, and the trees of Tempe are dead, and the very hills of Thessaly are not the same ... Aiiii ..." and she lapsed into a Greek so antique that I could not even remotely follow it.

After a long time, when I had my nerves under some sort of control again, I asked Aspasia if it would be dangerous for her to have a child.

"Dangerous? No, not for me," she said, and looked longingly toward the dining room. "Nor for the child either, if a wet nurse could be arranged. But I was hoping, that in a month or two I could go back to my tree, my lovely tree, the other half of me. And now it will be months and months ..."

Through clenched teeth I said, "There is an alternative."

"I do not know this word."

I explained about abortion clinics.

"Oh," she said blankly. "Such a thing, by choice?"

"Your choice."

"But Michael, it is your choice too. Even if I have this child, I must leave, I must go back to my tree. And then the child will be left with you. Do you wish a child?"

"I ... wish for you to be safe and happy."

She pulled my head around and looked into my eyes.

"But you do wish the child, do you not? I read it in your face."

"Yes."

She looked once more, sadly, at the saplings in their pots in the dining room. Then she put her arms around me gently. "I will have the child."

In March we began going down to the park again, looking at spots; and in April we planted the largest of the saplings in a quiet level spot half way up the valley slope, which looked down toward the river. The following week we planted the second one in a grove about a mile north of the highway. We had decided to keep the third one in the pot for the time being, in case of a late frost.

When we came back to the car, the same state trooper I had encountered the previous winter was waiting. He looked curiously at my dirt-stained clothes and shovel.

"I was just planting a tree ..."

He scratched his head and considered that.

"Well, sir, I guess you can plant as many as you like, so long as you don't cut any down. Ma'am." He touched his hat to Aspasia. "You folks have a nice day now."

The patrol car had disappeared before it hit me.

"He could see you!"

(We had spent many a profitless hour during the past months wondering why I could see her. Aspasia explained that there were just certain people who had the talent.

("Perhaps," she had said once, "you have a touch of the ancient lineage yourself." Three thousand years ... how was I to know? There were Greeks in Rome, and Romans in Britain, and British in Ireland. Some fluke of genetics, passed down the endless generations? Impossible to say.)

Aspasia gazed sadly after the police car. "It was so before," she said softly. "A mortal child makes me more of this mortal time, so people like this man may see me. He is a kind one, I think, he has fondness for the trees, so it comes earlier to him. By the time the child is due, many will be able to see me."

I had been giving some thought to another subject.

"Aspasia, will you do something for me?"

"If you wish."

"It will make it easier for me to care for the child ... after you are gone ..."

"Then I will do this thing you wish."

So I drove her to the county courthouse and took out a license. The clerk blinked at us neutrally and filled out the forms without comment. The judge, a pleasant middle-aged lady, seemed to find nothing amusing in Aspasia's condition; neither did the bailiff and secretary we drafted as witnesses. Aspasia listened with a faintly bemused expression to the rolling Jacobean legalese, but responded obediently, "Yes" when I prompted her. The judge shook our hands and smiled kindly at Aspasia.

On the ride home, Aspasia asked curiously, "What was the meaning of that?"

"It means that I will have a legal claim on the child, that no one will be able to take my child away from me."

I could feel her eyes on me as I drove.

"I think it means more than that," she commented.

"Never mind."

"Yes, Michael."

As summer wound on and Aspasia's pregnancy advanced, we took to spending long hours in the park. The trees were surviving, and thriving; they were several feet tall and about three inches through. They looked to me as if they were already several years old. Aspasia told me they would reach full size much faster than usual trees.

"Magic?"

She shrugged. "It is our nature."

Even after months together, and with her English nearly as good as my own, there were things I had trouble getting across to her. One of these concepts was "hospital." I finally took her to County General, and a matronly nurse showed us around the Maternity & Obstetrics wing.

Aspasia was horrified.

"What a terrible place to bear a child. It is all walls, and metal, and ... and ... what do you call this?"

"Glass."

"Yes. There is no life here. Can we not find a birthing woman?"

I've always felt that a pregnant woman has the right to call the shots for herself. Even if it was my child.

"Okay," I said, and looked in the Yellow Pages. Under "Midwives." It's interesting what you can find in the phone book. I located a nurse-midwife

in private practice, made sure she was an R.N., and closed the deal.

That summer was in many ways the happiest time of my life. Perhaps I appreciated it more because I knew it had to end.

The leaves were beginning to turn again, when one Saturday afternoon Aspasia called and told me she was beginning labor.

"Are you sure?"

She smiled, faintly. "Even after all these years, it's not something one forgets."

I got on the phone in a hurry and called Mrs. Ramney.

"All right," she said calmly. "I'll be there in a little while. In the meantime, don't do anything foolish. In fact, don't do anything. The situation will take care of itself." I blessed our good fortune in finding a midwife who didn't see anything strange about a home delivery, even if the home was an apartment. If it bothered the neighbors, so much the worse for them.

Actually, as Mrs. Ramney assured me repeatedly, it all was perfectly normal. Of course, "perfectly normal" can be a jolt– to someone who's never seen a childbirth before. It seemed to go on forever, and it looked to be acutely uncomfortable from the woman's point of view; and the blood! I was terrified.

Apparently I was the only one. Mrs. Ramney was calm, and Aspasia seemed in control of herself. I held her hands and tried not to let them see how panicked I was.

In the end, it happened rather abruptly. Mrs. Ramney said, "One more time," and Aspasia strained, and all of a sudden we had a baby.

"There we go," said Mrs. Ramney in a pleased voice. "A girl." And she thrust the screaming infant into my hands and attended to Aspasia.

Well, that was an experience. I looked at my child with astonishment not unmixed with horror. This strange, wrinkled, little red thing, my daughter?

"It's all right, Mr. Clark. A perfect little girl." She lifted the baby from me and handed her to Aspasia. "Have you picked out a name yet?"

"Michael will decide," Aspasia told her, cradling the child.

What seemed like hours later, when everything was cleaned up (not as difficult as one might have thought; any medical supply house will sell rubber sheets for precisely that purpose), and Aspasia had stopped bleeding, Mrs. Ramney left, after giving me detailed instructions on what to do and what not to do. Probably Aspasia would have gotten through it without her; I don't know if I would have.

It was after five and beginning to get dark. Aspasia was nursing the baby. I had never realized before what a fascinating process it was.

"Michael?"

"Yes?"

"Will you take me to the park?"

I bit back a lot of things I might have said; and what finally came out was, "Now?"

She looked down to the infant at her breast, and there was a hint of tears shining in her eyes.

"Please, Michael. If I don't go now, I ... may not be able to force myself to go, and then I'll ..." Her voice quavered.

I said hastily, "All right."

It was cool and dark in Potapsco State Park on that late October evening. Holding the baby in one arm, I wrapped the other around Aspasia's waist, and half-helped, half-carried her up the slope to where the largest of the saplings stood. It was almost ten feet tall by now, and I could barely put both hands around the trunk. Leaves, which in daylight would be showing the first hints of rust-brown, waved about our ears. I somehow got Aspasia up to the tree. She was bleeding again, and gasping with exhaustion. This was madness, for a woman who had just delivered a child to get out of bed, let alone stumble three quarters of a mile over rough ground.

But new strength seemed to flow into her as she gripped the trunk of the little oak. Her breathing slowed, and at length she straightened up, still holding on to the tree, and faced me.

Aspasia held out her arms, and I gave her the baby. She cuddled the child to her breast for a moment, and even in the darkness I could see the tears in her eyes. Then she handed the baby back to me and embraced us both.

I managed to get out, in a fairly even voice: "Will you ever come back?"

She pulled away.

"I ... I will try, Michael. But if I ever do, it will be a long time. Perhaps a very long time as you mortals judge the turnings of the years."

"I'll wait."

She kissed me.

"Goodbye, my love. Take care of her."

"Goodbye."

Aspasia touched the cheek of the sleeping infant, and gripped my hand one last time. Turning away, she cast off her robe and stood nude in the darkness. She embraced the tree, and, very gradually, she began to fade, dissolving into a misty wraith, seeping away into the bark, going, as my eyes blinked to hold her, vanishing, gone ...

Leaves brushed against me . Alone in the darkness. No, not alone. I

PAT MORRISSEY

## *Daughter of the Oak*

looked down at my daughter asleep in my arms, and we waited there in the quiet dark for a long time.

Then we went home.

Thalia is almost three now. She has long wavy dark hair and big greeny-brown eyes. For now she's a happy healthy normal little girl. I love her very much.

It's only when I get into a somber mood that I look at my daughter, and I get a chill when I think about the traditional question one always asks a child: "What are you going to be when you grow up?"

If the need arises, there is an extra, very special oak tree in Potapsco State Park. And another on the back lawn of our new house.

Every Sunday, when the weather is good, I take Thalia down to the park. Sometimes we have a picnic in a quiet level spot halfway up the valley slope, looking down toward the river.

A child should spend some time with her mother.

❧ *David M. Shea*

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## LETTERS continued *from page 42*

### Lynne Armstrong-Jones
### London, ON

Dear Marion and Jan:

Congratulations on an excellent Volume 2, Issue 2. I truly enjoyed each and every story in this issue, which is unusual for me! (I'm a fussy old coot.) I was particularly taken with Darrell Schweitzer's *Malevendra's Pool*; absolutely excellent writing, I thought.

In the editorial Marion asks that we let you know whether we have a preference for 'bright' or 'dark' fantasy. Well, there's no doubt in my mind: dark, dark and darker! I feel that there's a need for more high-quality 'zines along this line: the way it is now, *Weird Tales* is really the only one around. So, if you included stories along this line from time to time, I'm sure you'd be meeting a definite need (*mine*, certainly, at least!).

Thanks—and, if this reaches you before the holidays—have an enjoyable and *safe* time.

P.S. Hope you're feeling *better*, Marion!

*I don't know what you've been reading Lynne—there seem to be more horror markets than fantasy. I'm not a horror writer myself, and often wish I were—I'd have more markets. Fortunately, I write books. —MZB*

*I think you may really like our upcoming Hallowe'en Issue —vampire and ghost stories— that's kind of horror, isn't it? Thank you for your best wishes for Marion and we wanted to thank all of you who sent cards and letters and flowers and your kind thoughts while Marion was sick. Your thoughtfulness definitely helped. Six weeks in the hospital, especially for Marion, was really a drag. But the recovery has been speedy. Lynne, I want to be clear: the delay of this issue and many manuscripts was not because Marion couldn't work, but because I do not do well when people get sick. Marion turns manuscripts around in 24 hours and can work longer and harder than any three people I know, sick or not. And she is absolutely committed to deadlines —she told me, if I die, call the undertaker; if the issue is late to the printer, skip the funeral! I think the obvious solution is for her to stick around and keep healthy!!! -jlb*

### Faith L. Justice
### New York, NY

Dear Marion,

I found fewer stories that I actually enjoyed in this issue, but I put it down to the darker theme. I felt the clear winner was "Nightside" by Mercedes Lackey. An interesting story with appealing characters. Do you know if Ms. Lackey has or is going to write a novel about Diana and Andre?

"Malevendra's Pool" also appealed to me, but in a different way. The scenes were vivid and evoked the true futility of war. "The Palace of al-Tir al-Abtan" was packed with description which richly painted the setting and action. I particularly liked the ending.

Thanks for the columns on rejection. I've taken a lot of comfort from the fact that editors (including you) have almost always commented on my stories and urged me to send something else. One of these days I'll be able to say I'm a (published) writer, even if I still have to keep my job as a plumber to survive.

Special kudos to your artists. Your covers are always beautiful and detailed. The inside art is professional. I've reviewed a lot of small press magazines and the art is usually one of the major disappointments. It's nice to see the "pros" doing it right.

*Short stories do grow into novels—Mercedes Lackey's "Nightside" grew into the Tor novel CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT, as my own story "Blood Will Tell" grew into my novel SHARRA'S EXILE—and Elizabeth's "A Woman's Privilege" in SWORD AND SORCERESS grew into her novel, CHANGING FATE—DAW. It keeps happening. -MZB*

### Nick Faller
### Hancock, MO

Dear Marion and Jan,

I'm sorry to hear that Leisa Corbett is so picky in her concepts of what makes a good fantasy story. The late Ted Sturgeon stated that 90% of all SF was bad (I know not his words, but I'm being gentle) and I'm sure the same holds true for Fantasy.

A subscription is enclosed for the fifteen yr. old daughter of a friend, who loves fantasy. I would not give her anything that was not literate and interesting.

Ms. Corbett is looking for perfect in an imperfect world in which, as you know, the artist and author needs to learn their craft. The number of SF/Fantasy magazines has shrunk to a point of all of vanishing from sight.

I would remind her of "If," "Galaxy," "Fantastic" and "Amazing" to name but a few of the best remembered works. We, all those who love SF/Fantasy, must support anyone who tries to keep the short story market alive.

There is no point to name the people, both living and dead, who gave us so much joy as short story authors, but I can only beg my fellow "fans" to support you and others like you.

*(continued on page 51)*

# *Crystal Lycanthrope*

by Lucy E. Carroll

*If Crystal had tried talking rather than imitating, this story would be quite different. In fact, it might never have taken place at all, and that young man might still be alive.*

Crystal, you see, always wanted to be a falcon or an eaglet. She'd sit on my shoulder and raise her own wing-shoulders high, pointing her head to one side in imitation of the great birds of prey. She is, of course, not a predator bird at all, but one of many rare breeds of parakeet, somewhat like a cockatiel without the crest.

Someone once gave me, as a joke, a door sign that said, "BEWARE OF ATTACK PARAKEET." I laughed, but Crystal took it to heart. Oh, how she took it to heart. From that day, she actually seemed to go into training, lunging at mirrors, attacking the dog, guests, most shiny things. She did have a gentle side. She'd eat out of my hand or off my plate and fall asleep on my shoulder. Several times when I worked late, I'd lie down "just for a minute" only to fall solidly asleep, clothes and all. Crystal would curl up on the pillow next to me and be there when I awoke, hours later. The first time I opened my eyes to see beak and little black eyes I was quite startled, but now the soft feathers against my cheek are quite welcome.

No, she never talked. She imitated actions, not sound. She'd watch the big birds in the yard outside the window as they soared and glided, and then she'd try it.

She also loved to walk around on the carpet. She walked just like the dog, whom she cautiously followed.

In the evening, she'd sit on my shoulder and read along... oh, she doesn't actually read, you know. She'd stare at an occasional picture or look me right in the nearest eye when I tried to read something aloud to her. "Chup, chup?" she'd ask. "Oh yes," I'd answer. "It says so right here." I often read her stories of falcons and eagles and other birds of prey, and she always listened attentively.

I like fantasy, things just fantastic enough to fall within the realm of outrageous possibility. I love tales of lycanthropy.

It was after one such tale that she began to make large swipes with her wings. She swooped and dove, then soared out into the hallway and back into the room, stirring up a mini-windstorm in her wake. Before she landed on the ground, she put her feet out in front of her and picked up a pencil that had fallen to the floor. She carried it in her talons... or, rather, in her claws. She looked for all the world like any large bird of prey diving down for the kill. Then she circled around and dropped the pencil into my lap, chuttering happily. When she returned to my shoulder, I congratulated her. I'd never seen a parakeet do anything like that. "Chup, chup, chup!" she answered proudly.

She perched on my shoulder as I watched an old werewolf movie on cable television. "Chup, chup?" she asked.

"Well," I answered her, "I suppose lycanthropy is just one possible form of shape-changing. If a person could change into a wolf, he could turn into something else. If a person could turn into a wolf."

"Chup, chup, chup!" she cried, then jumped to the floor and began to walk around, cat-like. One would swear she had sprouted whiskers and paws. Indeed, the dog barked and chased her. She flewup, and came to my shoulder to hear my praise.

She never did those imitations for company, though, just for me. Couldn't get her on a late-night talk show for anything. Of course, when a visitor would leave, she'd go right to it, mewing or cooing or mooing, and doing all the physical things that went with the caricature.

One evening, as I watched her, my attention was diverted to the window. As I looked back in the room, I saw the shadow of a large cat on the wall. I looked back to the window but the cat had gone. Crystal made a great deal of rattling noise as I scooped her up and brought her upstairs for safekeeping. The dog barked endlessly. Crystal wasn't afraid of cats, but had an intense dislike of felines.

The next night, she refused to leave her cage. She just stared into her mirror and ruffled her feathers.

It was another two nights before she would come out, and then she did her imitations again. Peregrines and hawks. As she flew, she seemed to grow. Call it imagination, but it did seem to me that her color deepened and her beak and talons lengthened.

Later, when we were watching a National Wildlife special on television, she stared intently at the film of an eagle plucking a poor field mouse in its talons and wringing the life out of the small furry body. She began to hop excitedly, and flew to the living room window. The glass shattered immediately, and with much chupping and scree-ing she went sailing through.

# *Crystal Lycanthrope*

I was horrified. To lose my pet this way...! I ran outside to search, but after two hours of calling and hoping, I gave up.

I was at the fireplace, a consoling cognac in hand, when I heard a rustling at the window. Crystal had come back the way she had gone. She had blood all over her, and her feathers looked like she'd played leap-frog with a windmill. She chup-chupped happily and flew a few somersaults above my head.

I coaxed her to my finger and then brought her close so I could check for injuries. Except for the blood, she seemed to be all right, so I scratched her behind the ears. She loves that, ruffling her feathers in anticipation. Recognizing her signals, I filled a bowl with water for her. She jumped in and splashed unconcernedly, and when she finally left, the water held all the blood that had been on her beak and feathers.

She flew to the lamp to dry and then went to her cage, chattering for me to turn off the lights. She seemed all right, so I left her alone.

I thought little of the incident, just grateful to have my pet returned, until I left for work the next morning. The paperboy had thrown the paper wide of its mark and I searched beyond the walk, near the yew bush. There, in a bloody heap, was the mutilated body of the next-door cat. It looked like it had been torn apart by talons. Talons? A large gash ran from the neck to the tail.

I called my neighbor to break the news. Neither of us could imagine who or what had killed the poor cat, but I had a sudden insane flash of fancy: Crystal! I soon dismissed the idea as too bizarre. Crystal was simply too small. Wasn't she?

Crystal, chupping intermittently, seemed tired after her excursion, and remained in her cage for the next few days.

Four evenings later, she came out. She seemed larger, somehow, and bolder, with no fear at all. Oh, I realize that sounds absurd, but if you saw Crystal, I mean really saw her, you'd understand. It was the way she carried herself, the way she faced the world around her: it was the way my cousin looked when he won the lottery and my sister looked after her Town Hall debut.

Anyway, that night she flew to the window (it had since been replaced), but did not seem willing to crash through it again. She wanted out, but I pulled the drapes. When a friend stopped over, however, Crystal whizzed out the open door so fast that neither of us had a chance to stop her.

Once again, a search proved fruitless. I was heartbroken. I could only hope that some homing instinct would bring her back as it had on her first expedition into the outside world. I left my bedroom window open all night and the light blazing. Sure enough, I found her in her cage the next morning, again looking scrattly and bloodied, but quite pleased with herself.

I scolded her, but she would have none of it. She snuggled close to her mirror and went back to sleep. This time I searched the yard for dead cats, but, finding none, went on to work. Somehow, the absence of a feline corpse was reassuring. How could I ever have thought her capable of such a thing?

The matter wove its way through my thoughts all day. Could it be? Could a bird metamorphose into a larger form? For that matter, could any creature? Oh, caterpillars-to-butterflies are different: the body is the same, and that only happens once. Could Crystal become a hawk? Did the young King Arthur? Having asked the question, the possibilities opened. Was she a hawk because she thought she was a hawk? Did the cat see a hawk or a crystal-hued parakeet? Was she using some form of animal hypnotism? Had I been reading too much fantasy? Eventually, I dismissed all the questions.

But I had second thoughts when a friend called. His cat, Mittens, had somehow strayed to the other side of the development, to a section he never frequented. There the cat's mangled body was found by the local humane society. My friend was called because his phone number was on the cat's collar tag.

"You should have seen it, Meg," he recounted in horror, "... or rather, it's a good thing you didn't. Mittens must have gotten into a fight with some wild animal. God, the claw marks on the body!"

Now, Crystal has always hated Mittens. The cat had crept up on her once when she was unprepared, and she emerged from the fright with several fewer primaries and tail feathers. I never let Mittens in the house again.

Did Crystal prey on Mittens? I dismissed the idea as too bizarre.

As the days passed, I knew I would have to face the fact: Crystal was doing damned good imitations of birds of prey. Mind over matter or whatever, she was definitely not the same 'keet. And finally, I saw her in action. Sort of. Not actually saw. Caught her after the fact. Still circumstantial, but I believed in her at last.

I was in the basement at the piano, practicing Bach inventions, when I heard strange noises and scuffling upstairs. This was followed by a tremendous amount of chupping and chipping and horrid human screams. Fearful as I was, I hurried upstairs.

The sounds had come from my bedroom. The window was open, and there was a body on the floor, behind the bed so only the upper half was visible. I clung to the doorway for support. Beside the body -- clasped in one of its hands -- was a pillowcase from which spilled several of my necklaces, the cash I kept in my purse, and more items I did not recognize. The body of the young man was quite mutilated with huge tears in the arms and neck. There was a great pool of blood. When I had convinced myself that this was no dream, I walked closer and saw that the back, from the base of the neck to the waist, had been ripped open as if some immense ice pick or awl had done its work.

When I approached Crystal, she fluttered up from the floor to her cage. Her beak was covered with blood, and her claws were crimson. She chupped quietly but proudly.

"What happened, Crystal?" I asked, as if she could answer, and worried lest she might. "Who did this?"

"Chup, chup, CHUP!" she cried.

As I looked at the bird's bloodied feathers, there appeared to me to be two possibilities. Either someone or something had attacked the first intruder and then left, or Crystal had killed him herself. The latter idea was even more absurd than the idea of her killing the cats. She was simply too small, no matter how she mimicked. Or was she?

I took the bird to the bathroom sink and let her splash herself clean while I called the police.

When the uniformed officers arrived, I explained that I had been downstairs and did not actually see the murder. The officers worked first on the possibility of a wild animal. The neighbors verified the similar deaths of the cats. Nothing turned up, and for a while the matter seemed to end.

After several weeks, the police began to question me again. After all, they said, the one cat HAD been found in my yard, and there was no apparent way any animal could have vaulted into my second-floor bedroom window. The burglar had used a rope, but it was

beside him on the floor.

"You know," I told the policeman on one of his visits, finally wearying of the questions, "Crystal was here."

"Too bad you don't have a bird that talks, eh?" he laughed.

"She doesn't talk, no," I said, "but she has other talents."

"Oh?"

I explained how Crystal did imitations of eagles and falcons and hawks. I knew a bird couldn't be prosecuted, so I felt safe telling of the possibility of Crystal's involvement. Indeed, I was proud of her for saving my life, and recommended she get a medal. I suppose I did rather get carried away. The officer listened a while, then began to take notes. I admitted that I disliked cats as much as Crystal did. I also admitted to fondness for werewolf tales, for stories of lycanthropy.

And so, some months later, I found myself firmly ensconced in a rest home for the terminally dotty. The police suspected me of the murder, even if it was self-defense, but could prove nothing except my weak grasp of reality (so they said). They brought experts who spoke of multiple personality, of latent aggressive tendencies, of psychotic leanings.

I really disliked the asylum and I missed Crystal. I pretended to do as they wished, and gave all the answers they wanted to hear. No, I insisted at last, a parakeet cannot become a hawk.

And finally they let me go home. But the house was empty. Crystal had long since flown away, unhappy with the state-appointed caretaker. I was morose. The dog had returned from his kennel imprisonment with a colony of fleas, and was scratching and yowling downstairs. But Crystal was gone. I had no credibility, and a record as a loonie. I opened the bedroom window, and leaned out, far. It was a long way down, but it seemed a good solution.

I stared for a moment at the clear night sky, watching nature's nocturnal activities. Suddenly a squirrel scurried across the yard into the bushes behind Mrs. Remington's yard, out of sight. A few moments later there were sounds of a struggle, then silence. I wondered idly if the squirrel had been victim or victor.

Still debating whether to jump or go back inside, I was startled as a large hawk rose and circled in the meadow beyond Mrs. Remington's. I watched, delighting in its graceful flight. Fearlessly, I opened the window and reached up to the hawk as it neared my window, so much did it remind me of Crystal.

And then it happened. I felt thick talons grip my shoulders and lift me through the open window. As my feet left the floor and neared the sill, I gave an extra push, and was aloft.

The hawk was immense. It carried me out into the clear meadow air. We soared, we dipped, we flew, glorying in the air that carried us and whipped against our faces.

It occurred to me that such a flight might rid the dog of his unwanted infestation. I asked the hawk if she would take him on a flight, and she seemed to nod. As we flew with the exhilaration of free flight, the bird looked down at me and oh so softly said, "chup, chup, CHUP!"

"Crystal!" I cried.

"Chup, chup, CHUP!" she repeated. I could have sworn she winked, but of course, birds can't do that. I know now that everything will be all right.

❧ *Lucy E. Carroll*

## LETTERS, continued

*from page 48*

The amount of money isn't that great, less than one hardcover or four paperbacks.

Keep up the good work.

*From your first paragraph- we just want to be part of the other 10%*

*We hope that everybody feels that way. (Come on, people—if everybody gave a gift subscription, our circulation would double overnight—if everybody gave two gift subs, it would triple. So, be generous, folks )*

*- MZB*

### Bobbi Miller
### Stafford Springs, CT

Wishing you continued success for 1990; that means more great reading for me! I usually don't write to magazines, but I'm such an ardent fan of *Fantasy*, I made an exception!

*Thanks, we do appreciate exceptions!*

*- MZB*

### Joseph E. Trawick
### El Paso, TX

Dear Ms. Bradley:

Enclosed are my votes for the Cauldron. As usual, I enjoyed all the stories. Of the eight fantasy and science fiction magazines I read regularly, *Fantasy Magazine* is the only one I read cover to cover. I am never disappointed in a story. While not all of them will leave a lasting impression, I can count on a good story and an entertaining glimpse into someone's world. I agree with you about horror: blood and guts belong in the butcher shop, not on the printed page or movies/TV.

In regard to Ms. Burke's comments about distributing flyers, there are two small conventions scheduled in this area in the coming months: NewMexicon in January and Amigocon in April. If you want to send 300-500 flyers, I would be pleased to hand them out. If you are out of stock, I could photocopy the subscription page from the magazine. I love the magazine and wish you the best results with it.

One last thought about the magazine. Your columns are so helpful. Most books and articles about writing emphasize the difficulty of getting published without adding the encouraging attitude you offer in your columns and in your editorial policies. Thank you for the opportunities and kind words.

On another matter, I just managed to get a copy of SPELLS OF WONDER. For some reason, it never showed up in the local B. Dalton and Waldenbooks. I only found out about it through *Locus*. The stories are excellent, every bit as good as in *S&S*. I hope the lack of display in El Paso was not representative of the overall results of the book. I would like to see volumes two and so forth. Ms. Bradley, you are responsible for more good short fantasy in the bookstores than any other editor. I appreciate your efforts and hope you will continue.

*Thanks. We agree on the subject of horror. One of our rejection slips says,"just too gruesome–" Spells of Wonder, DAW 1990, might be thought of as Sword and Sorceress 5 1/2. S&S #6 will be out this summer. MZB*

### Pat Cirone

My twelve-year-old nephew, a former reluctant reader, snatched my sister's copy of the "all-dragon" issue the day it arrived and she had to fight to get it back long enough to read it. I think it says something about the broad appeal of the best Fantasy magazine going. Thanks again for starting it.

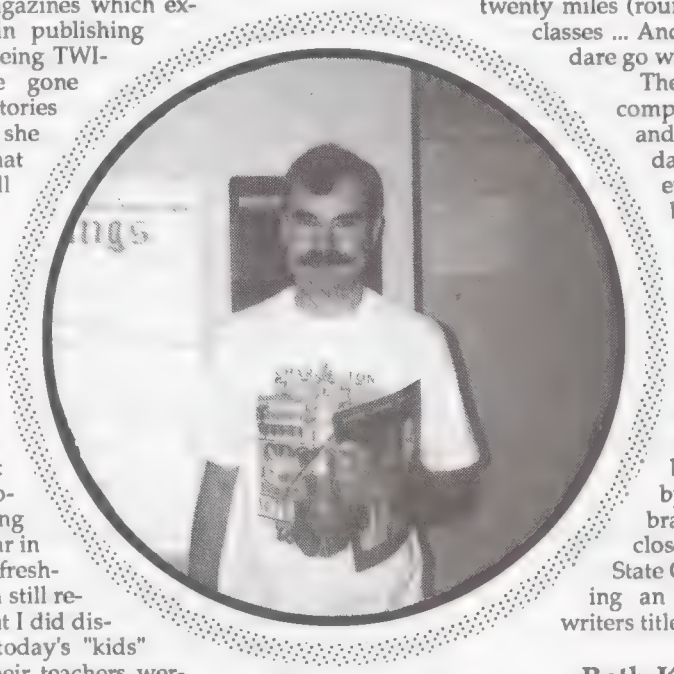
*And thank you—that's what we're doing this for. –MZB*

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Lucy E. Carroll:** L.E. Carroll has sold stories to THE LEADING EDGE and ELDRITCH TALES. She has stories in WRITERS OF THE FUTURE Volume I and Volume III, the latter taking second place in the contest. She has, in her field of music and theatre, one book and over two dozen articles in print.

Dr. Carroll has taught high school, college, and graduate school. Her music work spans singing opera professionally to directing the premiere of a jazz theatre piece in New York City. She has lectured and concertized extensively on her early American music research, and was recently named to THE INTERNATIONAL WHO'S WHO OF MUSIC AND MUSICIANS (Cambridge).

The last three magazines which expressed an interest in publishing her stories—the last being TWILIGHT ZONE—have gone belly-up before the stories reached print, and she desperately hopes that this fate will not befall *Fantasy Magazine.*



*~ Body by Fisher ~*
*~ Photo by Lisa Mezzacappa ~*

**Cynthia Drolet:**

I hold a Master's in English with a concentration in Medieval literature (most of my lit. classes, though, wouldn't let me just *enjoy* the stories, and I hate reading critically). My last year in college I also taught freshman composition. I'm still recovering from that, but I did discover that many of today's "kids" could write well if their teachers weren't so hung up on grammar and spelling– comma splices and run-on sentences scare the kids silly, and many of them can't work past that fear to explore their oh-so-fertile imaginations. Not in a 250-word essay, at least.

Marion Zimmer Bradley has published two other of my stories: *Dragon Lovers* in SWORD AND SORCERESS #5, and *Beginnings* in DOMAINS OF DARKOVER (due out soon– I hope). Currently, I'm peddling a young adult fantasy novel, an adult fantasy novel, an historical romance, and a superhero limited-issue comic book series to anyone who might pay me for them. (Thought I'd throw that last bit in for two reasons. One, to show my versatility, and two, just in case there are any editors out there wondering if they can see more of my work. Rest assured– they can.)

My next big project is to set up a small, 5-acre farm here in Texas with a vegetable garden and goats and geese and dogs and horses and, of course, Eowyn, my cat.

**Stephen C. Fisher:** was (at least partially) named after the popular mystery writer of the forties, of the same name (no relation though). He lives in Philadelphia, plays the viola in several amateur ensembles, and publishes serious and weighty articles on musicology, about which he says he has discovered that "that and a token will get him a ride on the trolley." He has several other stories in the works. *We'll be waiting for them.!*

**Elyse Guttenberg:** I moved to Alaska from New York City in 1972, fresh on the trail of my two older brothers who'd come up two years earlier to find glory and fight forest fires. While they made money I attended the university in a style I'd once been taught was Abe Lincoln's key to success ... like him, I studied by kerosene light, fed wood to the pot bellied stove that heated our cabin and hauled water from a nearby spring ... Unlike him, I hitchhiked twenty miles (round trip) a day to attend classes ... And that's about as far as I dare go with the comparisons.

These days, I write on a computer and my husband and I reminisce about the days when somehow, everything took longer but seemed easier. We live with our two children in a house we built ourselves (except that this one has all your standard modern appliances).

*Sunder, Eclipse and Seed,* the first novel in my fantasy trilogy, will be published this year by New American Library. Also, I've worked closely with the Alaska State Council on the Arts editing an anthology of Alaskan writers titled *Inroads.*

**Beth Kitchens:** I am a grad student working toward my Masters of Fine Arts degree at Georgia State University in Atlanta. I have worked as a fine art gallery assistant, as a secretary for a branch of a British firm and am now at the campus library at Georgia State, where I am able to research pre-1066 subjects—I love anything Celtic.

I have been a member of the SCA for 5 years. I'm interested in Celtic history, Irish music, and medieval dance. I enjoy collecting historical fantasy fiction books and silent film videos—Buster Keaton especially. I like visiting American historical sites, playing the Irish tin whistle and exploring flea markets in search of jewelry for my SCA costumes.

I write and illustrate articles for an SCA publication named *Early Period.* This is my first short story to be published!

**Bob Liddil:** Bob is currently working on *The Absolute Beginner's Guide to Writing Fantasy Fiction,* with such chapters as *What Is Fantasy, The Art and Mechanics of Story Telling, Character Tips and Secrets, and Self-Publishing—Pros and Cons,* an area in which he has had experience since 1975. He expects his

*(continued on page 54)*

# The Pest

## by Beth Kitchens

Dangling in mid-air, Dai rested her cheek against the frost-rimed wall and wondered how she had talked herself into this scheme. Dai had not thought twice of climbing the two-storied inn while standing on the ground in daylight, but now the boards seemed to stretch for leagues upward to the loft window under the eaves.

A clattering sounded on the pathway below. Twisting, she glimpsed a bundled figure seated on a horse as the rope slipped from her waist. The noose caught under Dai's chin, tightening the knot as red light exploded from under her eyelids.

"Get up!"

Dai groaned and tore at the rope that still bit deeply into her neck. Above her the figure was leaning from the saddle while sheathing a broadsword. Clad in mail and a half-face helmet, the rider showed a single braid of red hair gathered at the nape of the neck as warriors wore. Dai was puzzled by the absence of a beard until the figure removed the helmet.

"Ronnat?" Dai's voice croaked as she gently rubbed the welt around her neck. "Why are you here?"

"Vagnel-Ithnel in the north has fallen under Kohner of Tydmerth. Our midlands will soon be lost also." The woman started as if just noticing her surroundings. "What are you doing? I didn't foresee cutting down a half-wit attempting to hang herself outside of an inn."

Dai waited for her nausea to subside. "You think I would trouble to secure a rope to the roof of a two-storied house to kill myself? I certainly didn't bring this to put over my head."

She jerked a burlap sack from her waist and flung it to the ground.

"You're stealing from your guests?" Ronnat's surprise caused her voice to raise an octave.

"Hush! He's not a welcomed guest. Vandred, a kin slayer from the Alerian Isles, arrived a month ago. I don't care that this hostel is free for travelers—that barbarian will not settle here for the winter!"

"What does your uncle say about this?"

"He left to be the blacksmith at a festival in Killymore. I was doing a fair job of running the inn with Wold from the village until he fell ill. I've been going mad trying to think of a way to get rid of Vandred."

Ronnat frowned. "Do not ask me. I'm finished with fighting."

"It doesn't matter," Dai sighed. No one can force a traveler to leave a free inn while on the premises. I'll have to wait until spring when he decides to leave. All the while he'll be eating."

"After he's eaten your uncle's supplies for the whole winter?"

"Uncle will never entrust me with his inn again. I thought if I could steal the treasure Vandred keeps in his trunk, I could ransom it to make him leave."

"Dai, he would probably tear up the place looking for it," Ronnat said as she began leading her horse to the stable. "But don't worry. Our cause may be lost and the land will be soon overrun by the Southrealm, but no Midlander has ever been bested by a barbarian.

A distant shriek tore through the calm of the rainy morning and slid up Ronnat's backbone. Bleary-eyed, she reached to fasten the window covering. Ronnat shivered and returned to her ale as the mug was replaced by a glass of rusty colored liquid.

Ronnat focused on Dai's dark hair and pale complexion as the girl sat down across from her.

"I was wondering when that noise would begin to disturb people."

Ronnat shrugged. "It sounds like a bird my mother brought from her own country. It had a very bad temper, but it learned quickly. We used to get into trouble for teaching it vulgar language."

"At least you're talking now yourself. Are you feeling better—except for a headache that would stun a horse?"

Ronnat sighed. "I think last night I finally realized he's gone. My quiet little brother who wanted to stay at Winder's Pool to become a scholar until this war broke out. I didn't know Riordan had followed me until the last battle. My horse almost trampled over his dead body."

Dai shuddered. "I'm sorry. But you mustn't drink yourself into a stupor."

"I have no other way of mourning the dead. The first years of campaigning whipped the tears from me."

"Have you claimed kin blood price?"

"I heard that Kohner himself mowed Riordan down while clearing a path through our footsoldiers. The only way to demand blood price would be to find the rest of the company and overthrow Kohner's whole army. I am too tired to fight another war."

A clattering sounded on the wooden floor as a group of trappers loaded with snares appeared on their way to the stable. A boy dressed in a bedraggled tunic spotted Dai.

"We're off to catch that bloody bird. Do you think it talks?"

If it's a mynah bird escaped from an eastern merchant ship. I wouldn't worry too much about catching it, since it will probably freeze to death in this weather."

The shriek sounded again and the boy made a face. "It's too noisy to freeze."

He clumped outside and Dai flipped up the window covering.

"You still think you can get rid of my pest?"

"I never said that. I told you I've given up fighting."

"You don't have to kill Vandred. Just persuade him a little."

"All right." Ronnat sighed. "I could do better than hanging off the side of the house."

"If you want to wager, look out there."

In the farthest reaches of the yard, Vandred had thrown branches into a waist high pile and was now lighting it with a torch.

"What is he doing?" Ronnat asked.

"Sacrificing to the raven god of his people Remember I said that Wold from the village fell ill? He got his jaw

# The Pest

broken when he tried to stop Vandred from sacrificing last week."

"Now you decide to tell the truth. At least Vandred is outside of the inn."

Ronnat's first close view of the Alerian shocked her and she had to force herself to step from the clay walkway. Having heard soldiers' tales of the gigantic warriors of the northern isles, Ronnat had taken their remarks for the usual lies.

Vandred's long sleeved tunic and cloak did not hide his powerful frame and Ronnat doubted that Lornic, the largest warrior in her company, could have matched his height.

Drawing her sword halfway from the sheath, Ronnat took a step forward. "Vandred of Aleria, I will have a word with you."

Straightening from his work over a slaughtered goat, the man wiped a dagger onto his trousers. "I have no quarrel with you. Go your way."

Scowling, Ronnat stepped back as Vandred hefted the goat onto the fire. "You are abusing my friend's hospitality, something travelers of this realm should never do. I mean to settle this."

"I have fought with women in Korsa and I would not doubt your fierceness. But having now a winter sanctuary with strong walls, and being allowed under your laws to be left in peace, why should I fight?"

"I haven't challenged you."

Vandred threw down his knife. "I have heard that Midlanders never attack an unprepared opponent. But perhaps there's no honor between an accused kin slayer and one who refuses to demand kin blood price."

He noticed her surprise and grinned. "You should not tell your secrets near a window."

With an oath, Ronnat slammed her weapon into the sheath and joined Dai on the pathway. "If you still want to wager on who can get rid of that lout, I accept."

Grasping the branch as she lay on her stomach, Dai muttered and replaced the snare's trip line. Days had passed since the trappers had departed and not even a sparrow had been caught in the one forgotten snare.

A snowflake landed on the moss covered bark and Dai jerked on her glove. There would be no trading with a merchant this winter and no compensation for her uncle's goats which were dwindling at an alarming rate.

A twig snapped below her. Startled, Dai regained her balance and peered down into the darkness. A hooded form stared up at her and she recognized Ronnat's green cloak.

"Why do I always find you ten feet up in the air?"

"Probably because you always interrupt me while I'm working."

"You'll never win the wager up there."

Dai pushed herself upward and straddled the branch. "I'll have you know that the bolt of Vandred's door was misplaced today. I must make use

# CONTRIBUTORS *(continued from page 52)*

book to be available in the Spring!

"I am a freelance writer who has specialized in computer and video software technical writing and reviewing. My first love is Fantasy and the worlds of Fantasy Adventure Gaming.

"From 1985 to 1988, I published THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE, which featured, in fanzine format, work by Tanith Lee, John Morressey and others, plus myself as well.

"At age 42 I am just now beginning to enjoy the true meaning of life, Dr. Pepper, a good S&S story (such as those I read in the first issue of *MZBfm*), and a comfortable chair."

**Keith Minnion:** Believe it or not, *Three Wizards* was inspired by a scene in a Stephen Crane story called *The Angel and the Child*. Go figure. I also wanted to try a fantasy story "in the tradition" (read: better than) of my fellow Philadelphia SF Wriers Workshop members of the time, namely Darrell Schweitzer and John Gregory Betancourt, both not unknown to these pages.

(I think we're coming up with the Philadelphia Five here—Darrell Schweitzer, John Betancourt, Stephen Fisher, Jason Van Hollander and Keith Minnion!)jlb

My family and I live with a ghost named Tom (I'm not kidding—he *throws* things) in a big old Victorian house which we are restoring.

My first SF novel—The Roof of the Night—is making the rounds under the capable wing of Owlswick Literary Agency, while I work on number two: a contemporary urban horror novel called Up in the Boneyard.

**Patricia Duffy Novak:** I am an assistant professor of agricultural economics at Auburn University, a position I have held since 1985. I am thirty-four years old and live in Opelika, Alabama with my husband, Jim, three cats and two dogs. Jim and I are expecting our first child any day now. (*Congratulations! By the time you get this issue you will have something to read for the short times you'll have to yourself!* jlb)

I received my doctorate in agricultural economics at Texas A&M University, which is also where I met my husband. Before that, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Zaire, where I taught agricultural sciences at a secondary school.

I have a B.A. from Boston College in English and French, not the typical undergraduate training for an agricultural economics professor. Still, somehow, it all ties together. At least, it seems that way to me.

This is my third professional fiction sale. The other two were for Darkover anthologies.

**David M. Shea:**

Born: March 15, 1947; Winchester, Massachusetts.

Educated: variously in Massachusetts, Maryland, North Carolina.

Served: U.S. Army (received Army Commendation Medal).

Occupation: claims reviewer for a federal agency.

Marital status: presently single.

SF/Fantasy reader for many years; intermittently active in various aspects of fandom.

Writing fiction seriously for about four years; no previous professional sales.

Other interests: music; cooking; mixing own liqueurs; collecting odd and useless facts; writing (commentary, review, poetry, mainstream fiction as well as SF/Fantasy).

**Darrell Schweitzer:** Not new to our pages, and the winner of last issue's Cauldron, Darrell joins us this time with another interview. The last interview he did for this magazine was the George Barr interview for the special issue with George as Artist and Author. Darrell was out to see us in Berkeley last October, just before Marion went back East and got sick. As for Darrell—here's the edited version of his last bio: I am the author of about 100

of the time before he demands a replacement."

"No, Dai. If you have any sense of honor, Vandred will be alone in that room tonight."

Dai grinned. "I didn't realize that you cared for that muscular body."

"I do," Ronnat said through clenched teeth. "I care for it to be on the sharp end of a sword."

"That's hardly fair. I didn't arrange for his door to be unbolted so you can walk in, kill him, and win the wager. Uncle would have a fit if he hears there's been a murder in his inn."

"You're more curious about the trunk than the wager. How do you know Vandred owns a treasure?"

Dai looked at her as if the warrior had lost her wits. "You know all Alerians are pillagers."

Ronnat sighed. "I knew I wouldn't get any cooperation. Be outside of his room tonight and you may get your wish."

Still fuming at Ronnat, Dai crept up the ladder to the loft. She might be a warrior and an old friend, but Dai felt insulted that Ronnat didn't trust her enough to tell her the plan.

She needn't know mine either, she thought. Ronnat doesn't understand about having something to ransom just in case.

Taking a breath, Dai lifted the door on its loose leather hinges and gently pushed it open. Moonlight illuminated the sparsely furnished room and Dai noted with satisfaction that the window had been stripped of its covering, a habit of the Alerian she had ferreted out before her failed burglary.

Near the window was a cot so piled with furs that she could see only the outline of Vandred's sleeping figure. She crept past the cot and knelt before a massive chest facing the wall. Having learned some tricks from dishonest travelers one winter, she took a piece of wire from her pouch and inserted it into the rectangular lock.

Lifting the lid, Dai waited for the gleam of gold which failed to come. Mouthing a curse, she rummaged through a mound of clothing until she grasped a rough object. Bringing it to her face, Dai caught a glimpse of a chain on which was suspended a clay amulet in the shape of a ship.

Crikk! Startled, Dai crouched behind the trunk as the amulet slipped from her fingers and smashed into fragments against the floor.

The pelts on the cot erupted as Vandred jerked upward and turned toward the window. Following his gaze, Dai could distinguish the form of a bird against the night sky. The ebony feathers were limned with moonlight and the orange beak moved strangely in the darkness.

"Vandred the sluggard!" it shrieked. Prepare to fight for the Battle Raven!"

A flurry of wings heralded the bird's departure as Vandred let out an oath that chilled Dai to the marrow. Pulling on his cloak, he grabbed up his sword and shield before disappearing into the darkness beyond the door.

Dai skittered to a halt on the road a short distance from the inn. In a circle of lanterns Ronnat stood armed with

stories in the fantasy/horror field, and two novels, *The White Isle* and *The Shattered Goddess*. *We Are All Legends* is a collection of linked stories halfway between a novel and a regular collection. *Tom O'Bedlam's Night Out* is a regular collection. Another collection will be published by Ganley next year: *Transients and Other Strange Travellers*.

I am also author/editor of numerous non-fiction books, the most recent of which is *Pathways to Elfland: The Writings of Lord Dunsany* (Owlswick Press). Others include (as author), *The Dream Quest* of H.P. Lovecraft, and *On Writing Science Fiction: The Editors Strike Back* (with George Scithers and John M. Ford); and (as editor) *Discovering Modern Horror Fiction 1 & 2*, *Discovering H.P. Lovecraft*, *Exploring Fantasy Worlds*, etc.

I have conducted numerous interviews, written countless book reviews, committed poetry on occasion, and am a regular reviewer for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. I am also reviewer/columnist for *Aboriginal SF*.

Recent fiction sales have been to *Weird Tales*, *Pulphouse*, *Borderlands* (anthology edited by Thomas Monteleone, not the defunct Canadian mag of same title), and *Fantasy Tales* (England).

**Mary A. Turzillo:** Mary has sold poetry and fiction to *Weird Tales*, *Azimov's SF Magazine*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Pandora*, and elsewhere. She has published critical biographies of Philip Jose Farmer and Anne McCaffrey. A Writers of the Future second prize winner, she attended Clarion Workshop in 1985 and studied under Marion Zimmer Bradley at a workshop in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1987. At this workshop she developed the story line for *The Kraken*, to be published in *F&SF*, April 1990.

Mary, who has a Ph.D. from Case-Western Reserve University and teaches writing at Trumbull campus of Kent State University, became interested in bird psychology while conducting student tours to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and the top of Mount Whitney. She learned that the elder of two golden eagle chicks will often kill the younger. If predatory birds evolved into sapient beings, how would this murderous impulse fit into their culture? This speculation led to the story *Kill Dance*.

Mary lives in Warren, Ohio, with her skate-boarding son Jack. Nothing exciting ever happens there, which is why she reads Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Fantasy Magazine*..

Mary's sister, Janey, writes historical crime fiction. Mary has never ever tried to murder her sister.

**Dayl Waldron:** I'm an Oregonian raised in sheep country, and remember the sound of coyotes howling during the night. Now I live in Alaska and have moose in my yard and can hear ravens cawing. None of them speak to me, perhaps I don't listen hard enough. I have a degree in anthropology, love to garden, and read. Over the years I've worked in a plywood mill, as a grunt archaeologist, done map correcting for the U of Oregon Natural History Museum, and various salmon stream and hatchery jobs. (My husband Loran manages a salmon hatchery.) We have two daughters.

**Mary Frances Zambreno** has sold stories to the Darkover anthology *Sword of Chaos*, to *Sword and Sorceress* (volumes 3 and 5 ), and most recently to Jane Yolen's anthology *Things That Go Bump in the Night*. She holds a Ph.D. in Medieval Languages and Literature and is currently the fantasy review columnist for "American Fantasy Magazine."

She is a Writers of the Future Award winner for her fantastic story *A way Out*. She particularly enjoys writing for young adults and has an upcoming story, *Miss Emily's Roses*," in Jane Yolen's vampire and young adult series.

She enjoys teaching at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and has recently had a good experience doing work for hire—learning how to "turn out" a novel for a Robyn Talles series and getting paid for it—the best combination of all!

# The Pest

sword and shield. The ebony bird was perched on her shoulder and Dai could now see the black piece of twine around its leg.

Ronnat smiled as she faced the barefooted Alerian. "I see you are prepared this time."

Vandred turned toward Dai in confusion. "I would not have thought an innkeeper would trick a traveler out of his bed."

"She had nothing to do with it." Ronnat walked over and transferred the bird to Dai. "She only wagered that I couldn't flush you from your sanctuary. But we're away from the inn now and I think your pride will not allow you to run away."

"Aye." Vandred lifted his sword. "Let us finish quickly so I can return to my sleep."

Ronnat grasped her weapon and lunged before Vandred blocked with his shield. The tip of the blade glanced off his shoulder, ripping the fabric of his tunic.

"Out of practice?" she grinned.

Vandred grunted and knocked away her sword. They circled while exchanging blows and waiting for an opening. Having been trained in a king's court, Ronnat was used to a certain finesse in swordplay and was surprised by Vandred's hacking tactics.

The bird squawked as Ronnat's foot slipped on the icy grass and the Alerian's blade nicked her arm before she could regain her balance.

Biting back a howl of pain, Ronnat threw away her shield and grasped the sword with both hands. Charging, she swung at Vandred's legs. He brought down his shield as she arced the blade upward, cutting into the bottom of the shield.

The wooden rim flew upward and slammed under Vandred's chin, snapping his head backward as he fell onto the grass.

Vandred leaned stiffly from his horse toward the two women standing on the pathway.

"It is difficult for me to admit defeat," he said. But last night made me realize how weary I am of this life. I've decided to go back to my accusers and prove I'm not a murderer."

He leaned farther and closed Ronnat's hand around an object before kissing her fist. "A token of our battle."

Ronnat waited until he started down the road with a pack horse following before opening her hand. In her palm lay a white molar.

Dai laughed. "Now you have proof if Uncle doesn't believe our story."

Ronnat shook her head. "I have never had such an exciting rest, but I cannot stay. The remains of the company must be found. Although I can't bring Riordan back, Kohner's army must be destroyed before he overruns the whole realm. You wouldn't want a whole company of Vandreds here, would you?"

"I suppose everything will return to normal now. As boring as ever."

Ronnat smiled. "I have a feeling you'll never be bored. But it's a shame you didn't find your treasure."

"Yes, it was not what I had expected."

As they walked toward the inn, Dai fingered at the necklace hidden beneath her tunic.

❧ *Beth Kitchens*

## DEADLINE CORNER

✣ **Gryphon Award** Book MS 75k-100,000 wds. **7/30/90**

✣ **Sword & Sorceress** write for guidelines, MZB **7/1/90**

✣ ***Fantasy Magazine*** HALLOWE'EN ISSUE special Vampires, Witches and Ghost stories!! 2k - 5,000 wds. **8/15/90**

# *MZB* Talks to Writers

continued from opposite page

sometimes use science fiction or horror, but when we use horror, we want the kind which gives you a creepy feeling, not the kind which simply makes you feel you might lose your lunch. Basically we feel that what science fiction we use should be that of the far away and strange, not that which simply chatters of future technology. In short, if the total impact of your story gives a *feel of fantasy*, and if after reading it, I say—but—but—this is really horror–or, that this is really SF—I'll buy it; but if I can see on page one that it's horror or SF, it's not for us.

All of these are really no-fault rejection slips; some other market might jump for joy at getting these stories; but they are not for me.

So when I say that this or that story "does not work" or "just isn't right" I mean, of course, not that there is anything wrong with the story—there must be something about it, or, obviously, you would not have bothered to write it.

Let me repeat that" There must be something right about your story—or your characters—but somehow they didn't reach me.

Writing—I could not possibly emphasize this too strongly—is not, repeat NOT, a means of self-expression, except incidentally. If you want to "express yourself" keep a diary, or write for the waste basket. Writing—at least, commercial writing—is communication. If I reject your story, you're not communicating with me. Somehow or other, you're not reaching me.

"You just don't understand," you may say, (if you're a beginner), and I will reply, "Yes. It's not my business to understand. It's your business to be understood– to make me understand."

I can only read what you put on paper. Some people write me long letters explaining their story. Don't. Put the explanation in the story. Then, maybe, I'll understand your story—and so will the reader. But if I can't understand it, it's for sure the reader won't get the chance.

So try again.

*Marion Zimmer Bradley*

# Marion Zimmer Bradley

## TALKS TO WRITERS

# More Rejection ???

Yes, still another column about rejection slips. I dare say that 95% of the rejections I write—when I was typing them individually—fall into the following categories; and as a result I have set up a computer program for these common unusable manuscripts:

TOO LONG. Despite guidelines which say clearly that we have dropped our requirements even for cover stories to about 7500 words, I still get manuscripts up to 20,000 words. This length requirement is the only requirement I am *not* prepared to overlook if the story is good enough; even if your manuscript is a guaranteed Hugo winner, typeface is still inelastic ... and I can't commit half an issue to any one story, no matter how good. This is simply our philosophy, to give more young writers a chance. So I suggest that if your story's too long for us, you try a rewrite; almost any story can be cut; but if, like many people, you have your best ideas at 20,000 words or more, I suggest that you seek another market—or that alternatively, if you are really trying to write a novel, that you go ahead and write the novel; the original paperback market is booming—and they certainly pay better than we do.

SHORT SHORT NOT SHORT ENOUGH. Some of the short shorts we get are really too short; they are not stories but bad jokes or one-liners. I don't want these at any length; I don't like them even in fanzines. But I often get good short-shorts which are not quite short enough for our new short-short department– under 1,000 words. Here you have two options; to rewrite it as a short-short of under 1,000, or to let us consider it as a regular story. Meanwhile, pending your choice, we're returning it to you.

TOO SHORT FOR STORY'S IMPACT. Though this is not nearly as common as the aforementioned group, we do sometimes get stories where the writer is either trying to write a novel in five pages—to which I suggest that he go ahead and write the novel–see above—or that he try to write us a cover story. That's how I came to write a couple of my earliest novels; it doesn't matter a particle that you're an unknown if the story's good enough.

NOT ENOUGH FANTASY CONTENT. One of the most common rejections is no discernible fantasy content. This doesn't mean what you've written is no good, or even "plotless." Although I do sometimes reject stories for having no plot as far as I can tell. This also is as far as I can tell. If I can't find any of the elements of classical fantasy I am likely to reject it even as I would reject a story about football: I can't imagine a story about football having enough fantasy to interest me. (Here's a challenge for somebody.)

NO MARKET? I sometimes get stories for which I think there is no other—or just, no current––market at all. Maybe the story's just hopelessly amateurish; or maybe it's not fantasy. Maybe it isn't what I'd call conclusive enough; it hasn't a beginning, middle or an end. Maybe it would be just fine for your college magazine, but doesn't make it as a commercial story. If so, I simply urge you to try again.

NOT FOR OUR MARKET. Basically this means it's a perfectly good story, but not for us; for one reason or another, good or bad, we can't print it.

The commonest error of this sort is that the story's just too feminist or doctrinaire for us. No matter the quality, if the message of your story demands a soapbox, rather than a market, we can't use it. I suggest in this case you *hire* a soapbox; it's basically more honest than packaging your message as fiction. Or rewrite it more subtly. I feel strongly that any message in a story should be deduced or implied, rather than trumpeted.

Another reason it might be a perfectly good story but not for us, is that we have a kiddie readership, and we are rather strict on adult language. If our editor Jan can't read it out loud to her kiddies, we reject it; this would forbid us many admittedly fine stories, but we feel strong language should be, without prejudice, for somewhere else. Maybe we feel that if a story really demands strong language you should have a more grown-up audience who can appreciate it. Again the choice is yours; to rewrite it inoffensively, or take it somewhere else.

Really excellent, but we couldn't buy it if it were an assured Hugo winner; this is a story which is salable horror or science fiction. It would be fine– somewhere else; but for better or worse, we have chosen to go for the fantasy side. Now, we do

*please continue opposite page*

# Three Wizards

## by Keith Minnion

The old man paused on the mountain path, and pulled the necklace chain out from beneath his cloak. On it, pierced through the nail, was a withered mummified finger. He held the strange pendant up, silhouetted against the glare of the snowfields on the higher peak, and concentrated.

Nothing. No spark of power, no spark of life.

You have finally left me, father, he thought. At long last, it is time.

He took the finger pendant from around his neck and stored it carefully in a pocket deep within his clothes. Finally, he thought, time.

"Now," he said aloud, into the clear, wind-filled air, "now for the coda. Now I must find the boy, and the place of my death, and make the circle complete once more."

He leaned his tired body into the slope, and continued slowly along his way.

The long, cold winds from the HighArn carried snow with them, and by evening the valley of the Brethe was blanketed in white.

At the Swansblood, the snow meant higher, roaring hearth and bed fires to keep both tap customers and guests warm; it meant that Obe was sent to the barn almost constantly for dry faggots, "Or I'll have your sweet ass!" Kurrit, the burly innkeeper, roared as he kicked the boy out the kitchen door and into the darkness of the courtyard.

Obe landed on his face, but the snow was already deep and soft, like the Grand Astiyr's featherbed, he thought, rising and wiping it from his clothes. Though hardly as warm, I'm sure!

He followed the nearly erased trail of footprints of his last trip, quickly entered the barn, and pulled the vast and heavy door shut behind him. Kurrit hadn't given him enough time to grab a lantern, but Obe knew the way in the dark well enough. He walked along the stalls, lightly slapping the rumps of the horses and donkeys. The animals nickered amiably, even the strangers. 'You've a way with the beasts, lad,' a memory of the innkeeper's voice said grudgingly in his mind, 'I'll give you that much.'

"Haw," the boy said, and hawked generously into the straw.

He grabbed two faggot bundles from the rear of the barn instead of just one— "Now you're figuring it out," he said to himself, grinning—and dragged them back to the door. Outside, the rising wind moaned eerily in the loft rafters. A horse bumped against its stall, and whinnied.

Obe pushed the door open with his shoulder, and was momentarily blinded by a fresh gust of snow-filled wind. When he cleared his eyes there was an old man beside him, tall and thin and cloaked in dirty blue (Blue?), who took one of the bundles and said, "Here, lad, I'll close the door for you."

Obe stared, speechless, as the old man swung the barn door shut and then secured it. Blue, he thought, but that can only mean—

The old man gestured with his

bundle. "Shall we get inside? I'm froze colder than Ulfyion's balls in this wind."

Still speechless, Obe stumbled through the snow to the kitchen door.

"Here," the man said again, and opened it for both of them.

Inside, somewhere beyond the hearth's fireglow, the innkeeper yelled, "The draft, boy! Close the damned door!"

Beneath his hood the old man winked, and shut the door fast behind them.

"Th-thank you, lord. . . ." Obe managed. Most definitely blue, the color of the Gelder Order, a gelder lord, a wizard here, at the Swansblood, helping him carry a bundle of wood!

The old man pushed his hood back, and brushed the snow from his generous beard and moustache. The reality of the kitchen's warmth seemed to wash over him then, and he shivered deeply.

"In the tap room, lord," the boy said, gesturing, "they will serve you hot food and drink . . . ."

The gelder lord smiled. "Thank you, lad," he said, and gave Obe's shoulder a firm, friendly shake. "Lead on, then."

Within, the tap room was filled with pipe-smoke, with the smells of spilled ale and roast meat, and with the sights and sounds of a host of wayfarers and serving wenches making the most of the evening at hand. A few looked up, but when they saw the cloak they looked quickly down again, or turned away. . . .

The innkeeper sidled over to the gelder lord and bowed.

"Welcome, lord," he said, in an uncharacteristically respectful voice. "You'll be needing food, perhaps, and a bed?"

The gelder lord shrugged out of his cloak and hung it by the hearth. "Food, yes," he said,"but a spot by the fire is all the bed I will need."

Obe had never seen the innkeeper so nervous. Kurrit was bigger and broader and hairier than anyone in the room, but then, he had never—at least in Obe's memory—actually come face to face with a Gelder wizard! "My name is Kurrit, lord," the innkeeper said, ". . .at your service."

"Is this the valley of the Brethe River, landlord?"

"Yes, lord. We sit at the knees of the HighArn, in the province of Semeley."

The old man nodded. He seemed to recognize the names.

Kurrit hesitated a moment, then said, "I'd best see to your meal, lord. Obe! Where is that blasted boy? Obe!"

The boy stepped from behind the gelder lord's shadow. "Here, sir," he said.

The gelder lord turned to him with a raised eyebrow. "Obe? Your name is Obe?"

" . . .Yes, lord."

The gelder lord nodded slowly. "And who named you, lad?"

"He was a foundling, lord," Kurrit interjected. "He was no more than a squalling brat when some bitch dumped him at my doorstep. Obe was the only word he knew, so I gave it to him for a name."

The gelder lord looked into the boy's eyes steadily; Obe dared not look away. "You have no parents, then, lad?" The wizard asked finally. "No family, alive or dead?"

Obe shook his head.

"Answer him!" Kurrit roared. "Answer him or I'll–"

"Enough, landlord. Leave the boy alone."

Kurrit opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"If you would be so kind," the gelder lord said then, "my meal."

The innkeeper bowed again, stiffly. "Certainly, lord," he muttered. "And your desire?"

"Anything, as long as it is hot."

"Of course, lord," Kurrit said. Then he bowed a final time, and was gone.

The gelder lord winked at Obe. "You will have some peace for one night, at least," he said. "But enough. We will talk further, perhaps after I have eaten." Then he gathered his knees to him, and turned his full attention to the fire.

Obe was still standing just beyond the flickering light, gazing at the gelder lord, when one of the serving wenches pinched his rear and pulled him further into the shadows. "Kurrit, wants you in the kitchen, pricklet," she hissed, with a breath that smelled of onions and sour wine. "You'd best hurry, if you know what's good for you."

He shrugged her hand away, and with suprising, new-found courage, he said, "Why should I worry about old Kurrit with a Gelder wizard to protect me?"

The wench sputtered with sudden laughter. "Who," she said, "him? Why he's nothing but a shriveled up old man."

She raised her little finger and wiggled it, "A shriveled up old man with nothing in his breeches but a shriveled up old worm." Then she grew serious once more. "Mind me now, pricklet," she said. "The last thing you need is another one of his beatings." And she gave him a kick to start him on his way. With a final glance in the direction of the gelder lord, Obe ducked a second kick and made his way through the crowd to the kitchen.

Standing just inside the door, Kurrit was waiting for him with a broomstick.

"So!" He said, swinging the stick and catching Obe on the cheek before he could duck, "you think you can hide behind a gelder lord's cloak, eh?" He hit him again, this time on the shoulder, and Obe stumbled to his knees on the straw-strewn flagstones. "Where is he now to protect you, eh?" The stick came down again. "And why does it hurt so, eh? Why—"

Suddenly, the room was filled with a blinding white glare. Obe, with his face in the straw, heard the innkeeper gasp, then choke. He rolled onto his back, shading his eyes, and saw the gelder lord standing in the doorway with both arms raised. In one hand he held Kurrit, dangling him like a rag doll by the collar of his tunic. In the other, something on a chain, a pendant, a charm of some kind, shone with a light nearly as bright as the sun.

Then he spoke, and in a voice like the rumble and roar of thunder, he said, "I told you to leave the boy ALONE!"

Then the light was extinguished; the gelder lord thrust the pendant into his shirt, and then threw the innkeeper unceremoniously to the floor.

"Come, lad," he said, in a normal voice once more, and offered Obe a hand up.

The boy took it.

The gelder lord put his arm around him, and they turned as one, back into the now silent and motionless tap room. Behind them, Kurrit made no move to follow, and in the tap room no one even raised their face as the two shouldered their way to the front door.

Outside, in the cold, quiet snowfall, the gelder lord paused and turned to the boy. "Was there anything you wanted to take with you, lad?" he asked.

"Take with me—?" Obe took a sudden, stumbling step backward. "But I don't . . .," he stammered, " . . . I don't know . . . ."

The gelder lord laughed. "Of course you don't, lad. As I didn't, when I was as young as you, plucked from my life, such as it was, to walk this road. But I went, just as you must. And I walked the road, just as you must. Do you see, lad?"

Obe fell to his knees. "No, lord," he cried. "Forgive me," and he cast his eyes down in shame, "but I am just—"

"I know." The wizard put a hand on his shoulder. "You are just a boy." Then he helped Obe to his feet and held him at arm's length. "Will you come with me for a day's journey at least? Then, if you still want to return, I

promise you, we will come back to this place."

Obe met his eyes, but said nothing.

"One day," the gelder lord repeated. "I promise you."

Obe glanced back to the inn. "One day," he whispered.

"We will give Kurrit a chance to cool his anger, eh?"

Obe nodded, finally. "But I'm afraid, lord," he said.

"And cold too, I'll wager. Here," and a curtain of warmth sprang up around them magically driving the cold away. Even the snow was turned, no longer falling on them, but around them.

"I made a pact with myself," the gelder lord said, "not to use my Gelder magic, such as it is, except in the most dire emergencies." He tousled Obe's hair dry. "I think the prospect of freezing to death in the night constitutes such an emergency, don't you, lad?"

"Yes, lord," Obe whispered. He reached out to where the snow was falling beyound him, but no matter how far he stretched his fingers, the snowflakes retreated, and did not touch them.

"Come," the gelder lord said, "let's get away from here. I can no longer stand the smell of it."

They started along the path that led down the valley to the river, and the spell of shelter and warmth, like a huge but invisible tent, went with them, into the snow, into the night.

"Why," the boy asked, after a long enough time had passed for him to summon up the nerve again to speak, "why do you want me to go with you, lord?"

"To save your life," the gelder lord said, after a moment. "And, in a curious way, to save mine as well." Then he looked away, and they spoke no more all the rest of that night.

The next morning Obe awoke with the sunrise. He was alone in a clearing under the empty spread of an ancient beech. It was nothing but a dream, he thought immediately. But as he struggled to his feet, the pain in his cheek and shoulder from Kurrit's broomstick was definitely no dream. And neither was the worn blue cloak that fell away from him as he stood.

He stared at it, wide-eyed, as the gladness and fear of his new freedom flooded him anew.

Through the trees, then, trudging slowly, the gelder lord entered the clearing. From his belt hung a dead rabbit.

"Are you hungry, lad?" He asked cheerfully.

"Yes, lord," Obe said. Then he gathered up the blue cloak and shook it clean of snow and leaves. But the gelder lord held up a hand. "Keep it," he said. "I don't think I will need it today."

A stiff wind blew across the clearing, and for the first time since the previous night Obe again felt the cold; the invisible shelter of warmth, as quickly as it had appeared the previous evening, was now just as quickly gone.

"Put it on," the gelder lord said, squatting, laying the rabbit on a flat stone before him. He drew forth a knife, and began preparing the animal for their breakfast.

Obe put the cloak around him gingerly. It was huge, more the blanket it had served for in the night than a garment to wear. Still, he gathered it around him as best he could, then sat down again, with his back to the tree. He watched the gelder lord skin the rabbit, then gut it. " . . . I thought—" he began.

"Yes, lad?"

"I always thought that Gelder wizards were friends to the animals."

"And so we are, lad, so we are." The gelder lord picked up the skin of the rabbit. "We also learn to know when an animal's time has come. This one's time came this morning, under a yew, quietly, with dignity, dreaming of a warm Spring day, of a field full of clover, and a sky free of hawks. His flesh is old, but it will do." He threw the skin into the snowy underbrush. "And anyway, I'm hungry."

Obe opened his mouth to ask another question, but then the gelder lord grunted loudly, and there was an arrow shaft sticking out of his belly. The old man looked down, amazed. "Here?" he said. "Here?"

Then he coughed, and fell to his side, clutching the bloody shaft. Obe sprang forward, a scream forming, but the gelder lord waved him away. "Get back," he gasped, spraying blood from his mouth. "Get away . . .into the forest . . .now!"

Obe took a step backward, looking wildly about him. The darkness beneath the trees . . .the sudden quiet. . . .

He ran, then, just as a second arrow sang by him and buried itself in the trunk of the beech. He ran across the clearing, following a random, blundering path through the snow as he waited for a third arrow to find its mark between his shoulders.

But none did.

He dove into the shadows beneath the trees, finally, and rolled to a stop.

Silence.

After a moment he gathered his courage and peered out from the shadows. Before his eyes, then, the old gelder lord gasped a final time, and died at the foot of the old beech tree.

The forest was still silent. Obe held his aching sides as tears made slow, cold tracks down his cheeks. He is dead, he thought, shaking his head incredulously. Dead! But how could he be? How is it possible . . .?

Then he heard the sound of someone trudging through deep snow, somewhere beyond the line of trees. Obe drew back, into the shadows, and held his breath.

After a moment Kurrit, the innkeeper, stepped into the light. In his hand was a long bow, and on his back, a quiver of arrows. "I know you are near, you little bastard," he called out. He drew an arrow and notched it, his eyes searching, following the line of prints to the very place where Obe crouched. "Come out, why don't you, and take your arrow like a man." More silence. The world seemed to hang on that long moment.

Then the innkeeper laughed, and threw his weapon to the snow. Going over to the gelder lord, he rolled him over with the toe of his boot. Then he bent close, and spit in the dead man's face. The wizard's sightless eyes stared back, unflinching.

"Gelder lord," Kurrit said contempuously. "Hah." He began rummaging about in the dead man's clothes. When he found what he sought he stood and held up his prize, letting it dangle from its dull metal chain in the bright morning sunlight.

It was a mummified finger, severed at the root, and curled slightly, as though at rest. It was attached to the chain by a metal ring pierced through the nail.

The pendant, Obe thought, straining to see. The pendant that had glowed with the light of the sun . . . .

"This was the old man's power, boy," Kurrit called out. "This was his magic, and now it's mine." He placed the chain around his neck, and let the finger hang at his chest. He stared down at it, clenching his hands, flexing his broad, hard muscles, a cry of supreme exaltation forming on his lips.

But then the finger moved.

Kurrit's cry of exaltation became a sudden scream of terror. He grabbed at the finger convulsively, tore the necklace free and flung it to the ground, then pulled out his knife and stepped back, panting.

In the snow and dead leaves the

finger undulated, like a worm seeking cool dirt in a hot sun. The innkeeper stared, paralyzed now, as before him the finger transformed and became a hand, crawling across the short distance that separated it from his boots.

When it reached him, the innkeeper shrieked, but still did not, or could not, move. The hand climbed his leg like a huge deformed spider. At his knee it became an arm, and at his throat, finally, it was a man, an old man, a gelder lord with cool grey eyes, infinitely old, infinitely deep, staring into the half-crazed, shallow depths of Kurrit's own.

The innkeeper died in supreme pain, but without a sound. The gelder lord threw his body into the bloody snow by the skinned rabbit. Then, stooping, cradling his dead kin in his arms, he set off, past the ancient beech tree, into the shadows of the forest. "Are you coming, lad?" He called over his shoulder before he completely disappeared.

Where else, Obe thought miserably, can I go? Like a chastised little dog, he followed.

It was only a short time before they stopped. Before them was a placid, reedy pond ringed on all sides by hemlocks and the twisted skeletons of wild apple trees. There were snow-geese in the reeds, but they made no flight, and only looked across the icy water with patient interest.

The gelder lord laid his burden out on a large flat stone at the pond's edge, bent over it for a moment, then stood, shook his silver hair free of his face, and looked heavenward.

A breeze rippled the surface of the pond, and when it touched Obe he blinked in surprise, for the air was unaccountably warm.

Then, all about them, the snow began to melt. In moments it was completely gone, and the forest around them was grey with empty branches, and brown with mud.

But not for long.

For the trees, the bushes, even the grasses and weeds at Obe's feet, suddenly began to sprout, to grow, to unfurl new green leaves in the now warm, Springlike air. Apple blossoms burst forth, and the flowers were taken up by the soft winds, filling the air with their pink and white petals.

The boy reached out and grabbed at them, turning them over in his hand. Real. All of it: real.

The gelder lord looked down, finally, and turned from the pond. "I think we can begin, now," he said. "Come here, lad. Kneel by me."

Obe hesitated, then went forward, and dropped to his knees at the wizard's feet. "I don't understand, lord," he whispered. "Any of this . . . ."

The gelder lord raised an ancient, gnarled hand. "Obe was trying to reach this place, his place, to die in peace, with dignity, as he was supposed to. But the bowman, damn him, and his arrow were unforseen . . . ."

The boy looked down to the still, silent face half-covered now with flower petals. His name was Obe? "But that is my name," he said aloud, looking up once more.

The gelder lord smiled. "And mine as well. We are kin, lad, or hadn't you figured that out yet?" Then he uttered a quiet chuckle, and with it, he shed his air of sadness. "And the magic for you," he said, "has already begun. See!"

He held forth a bright new necklace chain. Dangling from it, not an inch from Obe's nose, was a freshly severed finger. The boy stared at it, his breathing caught behind his tongue. Then he glanced down once more to the dead gelder lord, to his hands folded at his chest; indeed, there was a finger missing there.

The gelder lord lowered the pendant over Obe's head. As the weight of it and all that its wearing implied settled securely around his neck, the boy said, "I will meet him again, won't I."

The gelder lord nodded. "The Three meet only twice in a Gelder cycle. Once at the beginning, and again at the end. When it is your time to die, a century hence perhaps, you will find your son, wherever he may be, and the two of you will journey to a place much like this. There, if you are lucky, your father will return to you, and together, before the end, the two of you will teach the boy . . . ."

Father, Obe thought. He looked down once more to the dead gelder lord. My father.

The sudden, raw thought of his own mortality passed through him then like a wraith. He became a man, after a fashion, in that instant. He said, "But such an end is a beginning, too, isn't it?"

"Yes, lad," the old man said. "There is always the beginning. A beginning such as this." He placed his hands on Obe's shoulders. "But be quiet, now, and help your grandfather bury his son. Then, young gelder lord, with what little gift of time I have left on this good earth, your lessons shall begin!"

❧ *Keith Minnion*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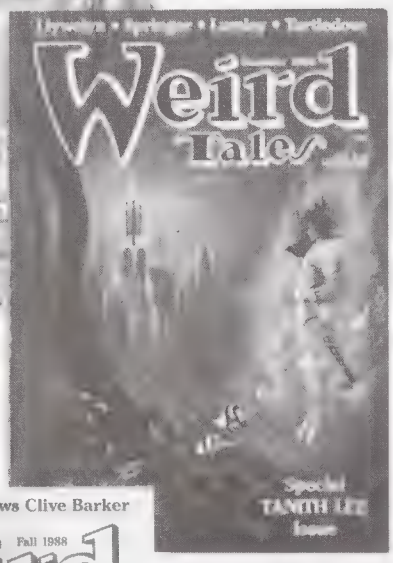


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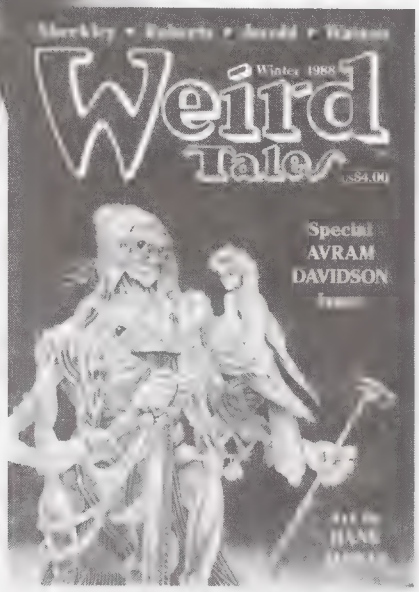


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